

SEWARD'S
FOLLY

EDISON MARSHALL

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By Edison Marshall

THE VOICE OF THE PACK
THE STRENGTH OF THE PINES
THE SNOWSHOE TRAIL
SHEPHERDS OF THE WILD
THE SKY LINE OF SPRUCE
THE HEART OF LITTLE SHIKARA
THE ISLE OF RETRIBUTION
THE LAND OF FORGOTTEN MEN
SEWARD'S FOLLY

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To the memory of Albert, Ralph, and
Webb Marshall and to Griffin Marshall,
my uncles, men of Illinois who fought in
America's greatest war.

FOREWORD

The mysterious lapse of the Treaty of 1889 between the great Russian and English companies is obscured in the shadows of the past. No historical evidence exists that Secretary of State Seward was instrumental in blocking the treaty, and parts of the narrative dealing therewith must be regarded as purely fictitious. Otherwise Mr. Seward is presented according to my most sincere interpretation of this profound though lucid genius. The prickly international situations of the time, the Sitka of 1867, and the various characters are as nearly true as can be seen through the misty distance of sixty years.

SEWARD'S FOLLY

I

THERE was but one letter for Jeff Sharp to-day; and the village postmaster himself put it in his hand. It had not been this way always. Only recently it was that white-haired Pompey, the oldest and most respected of Jeff's colored boys, always served up the daily mail along with his master's breakfast. Jeff used to go over his letters as he sipped the black drip-coffee that was now fashionable in the South—sitting alone at the head of his massive table, the friendly sun pouring through the wide, clear windows. Jeff had never believed that the Emancipation Proclamation could come between him and Pompey's adoring service; but this had been an idle fancy like many other things. Pompey had been lost sight of in those unforgettable days following his master's return from war; and being now a freeman, he no longer ran the white man's errands to the postoffice. The table of old mahogany had been chopped up, so Jeff had heard, for the fuel of an invader's campfire. The sun still beamed through the windows of the dining room, but Jeff was not there to feel it. The old Sharp mansion had gone with the rest. A man who had once been Jeff's foreman owned it now.

Letters had come by the dozen there, not one by one. There were dainty perfumed notes from the belles of Richmond and Augusta, New Orleans and Memphis; there were invitations quaintly expressed; there were friendly messages from old schoolmates. Had the black disaster of the war stifled the sociability that was the Southern people's dearest trait—or had his friends simply forgotten him, Jeff Sharp of Bull Run and Shiloh, Lookout Mountain and Gettysburg. People did not have the heart to write, these bitter days, he thought. Besides, many of his friends were missing or dead, the price of a lost cause.

Such thoughts had come rather frequently of late. The two years since Lee, tremendous even in defeat, had shaken hands with him in farewell had not seemed to heal the grievous wounds of bitterness and sorrow. He was called from his reflections now more by the postmaster's look of resentment rather than by any interest in the white envelope in his hand.

The postmaster was a veteran too, as was practically every white man under fifty in the town, and although the carpetbaggers had not yet come to take over his humble office, he also had known better days. Now he stood watching Jeff, a curious, strained, and somewhat sullen expression on his

youthful face. His curiosity was not, however, the childish kind that is the country postmaster's special prerogative. He looked rather grim, Jeff thought—a look he had seen so many times in men's faces these past two years. He was evidently waiting for Jeff to read the return card on the top of the envelope.

Jeff glanced at it, and his tall figure stiffened ever so slightly as he read the printed words:

From
WILLIAM H. SEWARD,
Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

Jeff's full lip curled, his bold nostrils expanded, and his eye roved to the wastebasket. He could not, however, throw the great statesman's letter away. Really, he had no personal animosity toward his mother's old friend—her sweetheart, in fact, in happier days before the great rebellion. Seward's genius had gone far toward crushing the Confederacy, but such had been his idea of duty. Jeff had admired him once and still conceded him immeasurable superiority over the rabble (so Jeff was fond of speaking of the Yankees) that he helped to govern. It was the thing he stood for that Jeff hated—the North, the Union, the Stars and Stripes. Secretary of State indeed! Jeff's heart seemed to swell with resentment.

"If I were you I wouldn't do him the honor of reading it," he heard the postmaster say. "He was next to Lincoln! I put him in the same class with Sherman."

Jeff looked into the man's indignant eyes—and his own eyes held visions of men fighting and dying—but he smiled quietly and started to open the letter. "He was an old friend of the family, Roger," he explained. "He is our enemy, but he was rather an honorable enemy, as Yankees go. I believe he did what he thought was right—according to his lights. I always considered him a gentleman."

Jeff was not aware that he pronounced the last word with a singular inflection. It was evident that he set great store by the term; that it had tremendous meaning to him. Of course his homeland had always been a stronghold of aristocracy, but now, when so much was gone and so little was left to cling to, pride of birth had become very close indeed to a religion to such men as he. His entire manner showed that this was the key-word of his

cult. He stood erect, his curly brown hair brushed back from his temples, his shoulders straight, his black eyes flashing.

“There is no such thing—as a *Yankee* gentleman,” Roger persisted. “You’ve always said that.”

“I have always said that the North was a nation of peasants—of backwoodsmen and of slovenly, mule-driving women—and that our war was a war between gentlemen and trash. Don’t believe for a minute, Roger, that I take any stock in this stuff that some of the older men are trying to tell us—that there was fault on both sides, that we should forgive and forget, and that it will only be a matter of a few years until real friendly relations are resumed between the North and the South. I am a Rebel now, and I’ll be a Rebel when I die, and the Union is as hateful to me as when, in defeat, we took down the Stars and Bars from the Courthouse. Just the same, I have to be fair to Seward. My mother always told me that he was a man of parts, and I have had many favors from him in the past. He was an abolitionist because he didn’t know any better. He was an enemy, and he’s an enemy still, but just the same I can’t throw away his letter.”

“It’s your letter,” Roger said doggedly. “Go ahead and read it.”

So Jeff read it; and he read as follows:

July 25, 1866.

MY DEAR LITTLE JEFF:—

I suppose it is absurd to call you Little Jeff any more, when you are long as a giraffe. Apart from those long legs you have acquired a stature of achievement that withering old age can never cheat you out of. It was hard for me to believe that gallant Major Sharp of whom our boys told me so much was the little boy with curls and an insatiable appetite for New York apples! It makes me feel a veritable Methuselah myself.

Come down and see me, Jeff, at once. I have a fine opening for a young fellow like you. Don’t linger, but start to-day. I want to revive our old friendship now that the clouds are lifting; not that mine for you has ever flagged. But I know young blood, the blood of a twenty-five-year-old gentleman from North Carolina; and I am anxious to prove to you that these black years of war have not changed me from the man you used to call

UNCLE WILL.

Office of the Secretary

of State,
Washington, D. C.

Jeff Sharp experienced a mixture of emotions as he finished the letter. Try hard as he might to repel it, a warm glow of an old friendship overswept him; and a spark was struck on the flint of his heart. For the moment it was hard to remember that Seward had been the arch enemy of the Confederacy, the very head of the State he hated. He kept remembering a slight, soft-voiced old friend who brought him New York pippins—a gallant gentleman whose one-time courtship of his mother had always been considered an honor to the family. Of course he would not accept the invitation, much less an appointment. Jeff knew perfectly well the kind of openings Seward had for young men: official jobs in the pay of Uncle Sam. Indeed, what did Seward mean by daring to offer such a post to him, Jeff Sharp? Did he for a moment dream that the conquered Rebel would turn about, two years after Lee's surrender, and serve in any capacity the enemy government? He must think that Jeff was humbled indeed, or he would not ask the conquered soldier so to swallow his pride as to accept a daily wage from the Union.

Yet presently he was brought face to face with an ugly fact which for months past he had been trying to disregard: the swift ebb of his own fortunes. The war had ruined Jefferson Sharp. The estate that otherwise would have sustained him according to the Sharp tradition had been spent and lost during the black years; the half million in confederate currency that remained would not buy a loaf of bread. He knew perfectly and exactly how many American dollars he had left. These would last only a few more days; then he must seek some means of livelihood.

He was not trained in any money-making profession. The profession of being a gentleman had seemed sufficient. He was now struck with the bitter fact that some of his own ex-slaves were better equipped to solve the problem of living than himself simply because they had learned trades. It might be that Seward knew of some business or professional opening, rather than a government position, in which Jeff might have a chance for life and respectability. It might be that this letter had reached him in the precise nick of time.

"It is an offer of a position," Jeff explained to Roger, the postmaster. "He doesn't say just what."

The other veteran stiffened. "He certainly is presumptuous in offering such a thing. I hope you are sufficiently frank in your letter of refusal?"

“How do you know I’m going to write any letter of refusal?” The pleasant way in which Jeff’s full lip drew into his brown cheek was faintly suggestive of a smile.

“Because you are a rebel, like all of us. Because it is a government position—”

Jeff’s grin escaped him completely now and made a big crescent in his handsome, brunette face. “The beam in your own eye first, brother!” he observed. “Speaking of government positions—isn’t this a U. S. postoffice?”

Rightly thinking that this would hold Roger for a while, Jeff turned homeward. He went to pack his bags.

II

ALL the way to Washington there were sights and scenes to remind Jeff of the Lost Cause. He had fought through this country. Every hill and valley held poignant associations for him. He was stirred to hatred by the sight of former slaves, strutting in white man's garb on the railway platforms; he almost choked with resentment when he saw the flag of the Union flying where once the Stars and Bars had so proudly waved. The capital itself was gay with banners. It seemed to Jeff that they had been flaunted for his benefit, to celebrate the ruin of his hopes.

He walked with disdain through the crowds of the streets, his head high, shoulders straight, his bearing that of conscious superiority. Here was the rabble who by sheer force of numbers had trod the Southern flag into the dust! He was scornful at the thought that these humble men crowding the sidewalk were voters and freemen, citizens of the Union; by the terms of the code he had come to hate, his own equals! These were the people who elected presidents and sat on juries; and thinking upon this, a vast scorn of democracy in general took hold of him. Why, their very garb showed what they were. Like most of the men he knew he believed thoroughly in dressing according to one's station, and these people he passed were garbed like peasants. Even the men of the better class were not dressed in the unobtrusive elegance which he knew to be the thing; their broadcloth suits lacked the perfect tailoring of his own English-made garments; they used cotton in place of linen and silk; they wore their clothes like countrymen.

For himself, he cut a fine figure, and he was proud of it. More than one pair of eyes turned toward him as he strode proudly down the street, wondering who this distinguished, scornful youth might be; but he did not condescend to return the glances. Mostly he walked with somber eyes looking straight ahead, Roman head lifted; proud, arrogant, and aloof.

He was sorry, now, that he had come. Now that he had beheld his conquerors his bitterness was whetted and rekindled; and he was determined to answer Seward's offer with fitting scorn. Poverty was lowering upon him; but surely he could not be induced to accept wages from the foe! He was annoyed when a doorkeeper made him send in his name for permission to enter the Secretarial offices; and he was actually hot with resentment that Seward should keep him waiting while he talked with other visitors,

particularly in that they were humble men who later viewed him askance in the passage. Now, as he walked into the statesman's inner chamber, a bright red spot glowed in each of his dusky cheeks; and he could hardly keep from trembling.

Yet nothing at all was as Jeff thought it would be. Somehow or other, his spleen seemed to wither within him and for the moment disappear. He suddenly forgot his sullen anger. He could only see old Seward, standing up to greet him.

Seward had been a great man before ever the storm of war burst over the land. He was a greater man now. Such trial as he had undergone either destroy men, or make them giants. Jeff was suddenly stricken and humbled in spite of himself; his arrogance dispelled; his resentment gave way to wonder. This man had been close to Lincoln, which was enough to mark him. Jeff glimpsed again the dauntless purpose, the idealism, the constructive genius of the greatest statesmen of the ante-bellum period.

He was a small man physically—scarcely coming to Jeff's shoulder—and his voice was subdued and soft. His enemies, however, had learned not to take hope from either of these things. Jeff saw with amazement that his hair had turned perfectly snowwhite since their last meeting; and he saw, also, the undying scars left from that black and tragic night of April 14, the year before. Seward was smiling, kindly and apparently in perfect understanding.

"Well, well, Jeff," he began, "coming in like a lion to beard the old man in his den!"

"And going out like a lamb, I suppose, after listening to you awhile," Jeff replied, smiling for the first time since he had arrived in Washington. "An ordinary man has no chance with you, Mr. Seward."

"I remember a curly-haired chap who used to call me Uncle Will. I'd hate to have him stop, even if he has grown like Jack's beanstalk!"

Jeff took a chair, and for a few minutes both men talked of familiar things—Greenbay, the old Sharp mansion where so often Seward had been a welcome guest, Jeff's departed parents, and the old, dear, never-to-be-recalled prebellum days. Very soon, however, Seward took up the real object of the summons.

"As I told you in my letter, Jeff, I have an opening for you," he began. "I have been thinking of you ever since the war—particularly since I heard of your financial losses—and have been watching out for an appointment for

you. I did not want to give you something that would bore you. I know your active disposition—Jeff, I know your real tastes better than you know them yourself. A young man like you is apt to go off at a tangent, so to speak, because of various, mistaken ideas; and sometimes he needs an old friend to put him on the right track.”

His eyes looked straight into Jeff’s; and the latter felt that the old statesman knew his every thought.

“It is easy enough for the victor to tell the vanquished what he should think—what ideas he should have,” Jeff replied with a trace of bitterness. He straightened proudly in his chair.

“Let’s forget about victor and vanquished right now. Jeff, I have a job for you. One of a great deal of responsibility.”

“A government job?”

“Yes. For the United States Government.”

“I can’t take it.”

Jeff’s tone was determined, even curt; but although he watched carefully he could not see the slightest sign of resentment or anger in the statesman’s face. Evidently his greatness could not suffer such emotions. Indeed he smiled, quietly and dimly.

“You do not know what it is, yet,” he said. “Please don’t refuse it till I tell you about it.”

“I am afraid you’ve told me the important thing already, Mr. Seward. You said it was a government job. I, a Rebel, can’t give my services to the enemy who conquered me, nor can I take his pay. Mr. Seward, I’d sooner starve.”

“Let’s leave your personal equation out of it for a moment,” Seward went on patiently. “I am not offering this wholly to keep you from starvation. My viewpoint is that of the United States of America. I want certain work done, and I believe you can do it. Jeff, you are not a Rebel now. There is no such thing as a rebel after a rebellion is crushed. You are a citizen of the United States, whether you like it or not.”

“If I am, I won’t be for long. I intend to move—probably to England. Mr. Seward, the Rebellion is crushed, as you say, but though you can break the Southern heart, you can’t break its spirit. You ask me to go to work for the United States. I don’t believe in the United States. I don’t believe in its flag, in its basic tenets, in its people, or in a form of government subject to

the rule of the people. I couldn't be loyal to the United States even if I did go to work for it. I'll admit I need a job, but the least vestige of honor must make me tell you these things. If you offer me a job afterwards, you do it at your own risk."

"Then on my own risk let it be! I offer you a job—a real one; one in which you can do service to this popular government which you despise. Jeff, there must be a new ideal of service come into this land. Perhaps I should say a new ideal *has* come, only you are not yet aware of it. This is your country, whether you like all of it or not—whether or not you have forgiven it for making you stay in the Union against your will. This is America. Our flag is your flag, so long as you live within the borders of these United States. You tried to cast down that flag for reasons that you thought were right, but you did not succeed, and now you must make the best of it. Jeff, you pride yourself on being a gentleman."

"The good Lord knows I hope I am!"

"I think you are. You should be—with what is behind you. Do you know the first obligation of a gentleman?"

"Loyalty! That's the first code, according to my belief. I am trying to be loyal to the South!"

"Jeff, the South doesn't exist any more, as an entity. It is all in the Union. It is all the United States. That point was proved on the terrible battlefields of this war. It must never come up again. The first code of a gentleman, Jeff, is, as you say, loyalty, but it is loyalty to the obligation imposed upon a gentleman. Part of the obligation—a great, great part—can be summed up in one word—sportsmanship.

"Jeff, you must do the sporting thing. This is your government. You tried to overthrow the Union, the principles on which it is based. Nevertheless, the Union is your Union as well as mine; it is the government of your people, the land of your birth. Now, that it has been proven that the Union still endures, you must work for it, and serve it, and try to sustain it. Be a good loser, Jeff. You may not like a law, but if the law stands, it is the sporting thing for gentlemen to obey it. We must not think of ourselves any more; no longer think in terms of States and sections. The sooner both sides recognize this fact, the sooner we can begin to build again. Whether you like it or not, Jeff, this is the only country that you have, and the sportsman's only choice is either to leave it altogether, as you said you might do, or else to serve it to the best of your power.

“This is a democratic nation, Jeff. It was founded for the good of the most number of people. You may not believe in democracy, but even the aristocrat knows the old code of *noblesse oblige*! The only possible standard of aristocracy, Jeff, is *service*—the struggle to make this dark world a better place to live in for all men, high and low. Since the Union must stand, your obligation is now to that Union—to make this country the best possible country.

“I am going to offer you the post. I do not believe that you will fail to give it your best effort. I think I know you better than you know yourself. Besides, Jeff, I don’t believe all you say about the Republic—how you don’t believe in it, its people, its tenets, its popular government. Jeff, the government of the people has many enemies. There are plenty of people in foreign countries—men in high places—who would like to see this great Republican experiment of ours come to a dismal and hopeless failure; but I don’t believe that you are one of them. At least, you would not be if you knew what I know—if you knew the meaning of the word Liberty. I have always regarded your welfare, my boy, and I never gave better advice than when I advise you to conquer your bitterness against the United States, and to find your happiness in serving it and building it up the best you know how. Lincoln said to treat you as if you had never been away. I want you, and your people, to get that same, noble idea—to act as if you had never been away. That way lies greatness for you as well as for us.

“It will take a long time to reach that ideal. Perhaps it will take another great war—when the men from the North and the men from the South stand side by side against a common enemy. Perhaps it will take just such a crisis to teach us the real worth of this nation, the full realization why it must endure.

“It must grow in size and power, so that its enemies may never overthrow it. This is the cause for which I would like to have you dedicate your life—the betterment of this Republic. You could not find a higher cause.”

He paused, and the after-sound of his low, soft voice remained in Jeff’s ears for some seconds. The old man’s quiet eyes fastened on the Rebel’s face.

“I can’t work for something I don’t believe in,” was the reply at last. “Uncle Will, you are asking more than flesh and blood can stand.”

“I am going to continue to ask it. It is when we do more than it seems possible for flesh and blood to stand that real happiness and real vision come

to us. Are you ready to hear my proposition?”

“Yes. But I make no promises.”

“I won’t ask any—now. Jeff, I am about to offer you a real commission. It is a great chance for real service to this nation of ours—these Re-United States.”

III

ONE of Seward's great gifts was simplicity—in spite of a wonderfully complex mental make-up—and sitting in his inner chamber, he related very simply the international situation which gave Jeff his great opportunity. Not once did his voice rise above its even tenor. His large eyes remained quiet, his cheeks showed no trace of the warm hues that usually accompany inner excitement, and his lean hands hardly ever left their position on his desk. Nevertheless, Jeff did not for a moment doubt but that the great American was speaking from his heart.

“Jeff, do you know anything about Russian-America—Alaska, as it is beginning to be called?” he asked.

“Nothing at all—except that I wouldn't want to live there. I have heard that it's one big iceberg.”

“That's the general impression—that it is simply an ice-sheet, worth nothing at all to any one. Fortunately, nothing could be farther from the truth. Lately, a few of us have obtained the real facts about Alaska; but unfortunately, we are not the sole possessors of those facts. If we were, the problem would be greatly simplified—and I would have no post to offer you.

“Perhaps you know that a party of American surveyors have recently returned from Alaska, where they were at work in connection with the laying of the proposed cable between Siberia and Alaska. The project is now abandoned, but while in the North, these men obtained certain valuable information concerning the country. I have here in my desk their reports, verifying what I have always believed to be the case about that vast northern territory.

“Jeff, did you know that the territory of Alaska is over half a million square miles, an area much greater than that of the original thirteen States? Do you know that it has untold wealth in timber and minerals, fisheries and furs? Its wealth hasn't been scratched. While it is true a great part of it is unfit for agriculture, yet without doubt it will support a population well over a million—a point not to be overlooked in these days of teeming races.

“It is true that much of the interior has merciless winters, but thousands of square miles on the coast side of the mountains have winters as mild as

that of Maryland. Its fur alone, not to be compared in importance with its fisheries and lumbering that will be developed in the next few decades, makes it the most important international prize in the world to-day. And there it lies—almost at our doors—ready to be taken!”

“I thought Russia owned Alaska,” Jeff remarked.

“Russia does own Alaska—by right of exploration. Just the same, Russia will not own Alaska always; or very much longer, for that matter. And this brings us to a very delicate international situation.

“In these days of fleets and armies, Jeff, a country must not own possessions which it can not defend. In a war with any great power Russia can not defend Alaska. It is too far from the base of supplies. Up until now none of her enemy nations have thought it worth while to take Alaska from her; but now, in these days of expansion, more than one nation is beginning to look northward. And there is one power in particular that feels a special need of Alaska—to round out her already tremendous American possessions. Do you know which of the great powers I mean?”

“I suppose—England. The friend of the South.”

“Not the friend of the South particularly. Rather the enemy of the Union. At least, such was her attitude during the late war.”

“In other words, her friendship during the war was not due to any special fondness for us, but simply because she wanted to see the Union weakened or destroyed? I beg your pardon, sir, but I can’t believe that. She befriended us because she thought—she knew that the South was right.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Jeff. Perhaps in years to come, when England has a more popular government than now, she will be a real friend of the South and the North too; but she has been a poor friend lately. Her ruling classes are suspicious of republics. They want to see us fail. This is not a statesman’s conjecture, Jeff—unhappily it is a fact. Many English leaders are jealous of our growing power; and their attitude during the late war could not be mistaken. The fact that England’s prosperity largely depends on cotton influenced her business people in the South’s favor, it is true; but her pro-Southern attitude was mostly due to the fact that her governing set hates us and fears us. And Jeff, I am bound I’ll make them groan for it now.

“Those men want to see us broken into many little nations on whom England can impose her will. They want her to be all-powerful in the new world as well as the old. She needs Alaska to round out her American possessions they think,—to give her a full sweep on the Pacific. But I don’t

want England to have Alaska, Jeff. I don't want to see any great foreign power increase its holdings in America. Russia is an absolute monarchy, and except for Alexander himself and a few of the more liberal nobles, her ruling classes have no friendship for us, yet at present I would rather she kept it than that England should have it. At least she defended the Union during the war. Russia, however, can not keep Alaska, simply because she can not defend it. Sooner or later England will see an opportunity to seize it; on one excuse or another. And the nation which should have it—that Nation for whom I dream the greatest power in all the world of nations—is—”

“United States!”

“Yes. We must have Alaska, Jeff. If we do not get it now, we never will get it. We need it—perhaps not so much now as later—and particularly, we don't want our cousin to get it. And Russia, realizing her inability to defend it from England, has proposed that we buy it from her—for seven millions of dollars. Jeff, there never was such a bargain in land values in recent times.

“Why don't we snap it up, you ask? Because already England is trying to hook on to it.

“This is the situation, Jeff. Perhaps you know that the Czar has leased all of Alaska to a certain Russian corporation, known as the Russian-American Company. It is semi-imperial, and is an absolute monopoly. These people have been running Alaska to suit themselves, until lately. They have had their capital at Sitka, and by enslaving the Aleuts, they have until recently reaped a tremendous profit in furs. Lately, however, the Czar put certain restrictions on them that interfered with their profits, but they hoped that when their charter was renewed some of these restrictions would be done away with. Their old charter has at present expired; and they have requested that it be renewed.

“For several reasons the Czar did not wish to renew it. The principal one was that he wants to sell Alaska to us, to avoid having it taken away from him later. A second reason is, perhaps, that he is dissatisfied with the way the Company has been operating the territory. He is a liberal monarch and he does not approve of enslaving the native population; and besides, he seems to be suspicious of his agents in general. Perhaps he thinks they may be playing into the hands of his enemies. However, pressure was brought to bear upon him, and he did offer to renew the Russian Company's contract, but his terms included not only those restrictions which had lately cut down the Company's profits, but many others. Indeed, he purposely made the

terms so unfavorable that the Company could not ordinarily afford to accept them.

“It didn’t quite work out as he thought, however. The Company did not want to lose their gold mine. So they planned a little deal with England.

“You see, Jeff, the Russian-American Company had subleased, by the treaty of 1839, certain parts of Alaska to the Hudson’s Bay Company, the great English semi-imperial corporation. Practically all of the mainland of the Panhandle is already in English hands. Now the Russian-American Company’s officials conceived of even a closer union with the English company, the terms of which would be so favorable that they could well afford to renew their charter with the Czar. In other words, their acceptance of the Czar’s charter was contingent upon whether they could make the right kind of a treaty with England as to the operation of the territory.

“Right now, Jeff, the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Russian-American Company are trying to get together. If they do get together, the latter will accept the Czar’s terms as to the renewal of the charter, and the United States will not get Alaska. It is easy to see who will get Alaska, however. The English Hudson’s Bay Company will spread throughout the territory, English people will colonize it; and it will soon be one of England’s colonial possessions in title as well as in fact.

“Jeff, I want to fool them. I don’t want England to have Alaska. I want it to be United States territory. And if that deal between the two great monopolies does not go through before February first of next year, we *will* have Alaska.

“On February first the Russian ambassador to America will leave St. Petersburg with authorization to accept our terms of seven millions of dollars. The Czar is giving the Russian-American Company until that date to accept the new charter. Meanwhile, both this Company and the English officials are taking their time about the matter; they don’t realize that there is another finger actively in the pie. They have only contempt for us, the Yankee nation. They think we are a mob-ruled nation of peasants that can’t begin to lift our head in an international game between such mighty powers as Russia and England. They don’t know of our offer or of the Czar’s attitude toward us; and they must not know. Otherwise they would close their deal and accept the contract at all costs.

“The rumor of it, however, may leak out. And now, Jeff, I am ready to talk business.

“We want a man to represent America in this matter. Of course, we have representatives in Petersburg; but we want to send a secret agent with secret orders, to Sitka—the capital of Alaska and the seat of the monopoly. We want a young man, a soldier—one who will take a chance.

“In thinking about whom to send, you came to my mind. You were a Rebel, but you can’t stay a Rebel all your life. You have a tough frame for all your pampering by your mother; steady hands and eyes; clean, long, active muscles. You are somewhat of a gentleman, so you can fit in any company. You are a handsome devil, in case you have to worm any secrets out of the ladies. You inherited the makings of a diplomat from your distinguished father—one of the ablest representatives America ever had—and your people have always gone in for the consular service and foreign appointments. Most of all, if you are the same boy you used to be, nothing pleases you quite so much as an adventure or a fight.

“Jeff, I want you to block that deal between England and Russia. That is your main instruction. Of course, you can report to me from time to time how things are going, and any news that has a bearing on the question; but your main work is—to stop that deal!”

“But how in the world can I stop it, if they want to make it?” Jeff demanded.

Seward smiled dimly. “How did British-built privateers stop our merchantmen, the rascals! Jeff, you will have to decide that for yourself. Living at the Alaskan capital you will see how things are going, and by watching your chance, you can occasionally throw a monkey wrench into the Russo-British machinery.

“You don’t have to be afraid of hurting England’s feelings. She needs a few setbacks to teach her respect for her country cousin. I don’t want you to get us into war—only the worst of blunderers does that. Her attitude during the late Rebellion was actually responsible for many deaths; but we must not repay her in kind. However, there is not much else that you can’t do, if necessary, according to the secret-service code that Great Britain understands perfectly well.”

Seward shut his teeth with a click. “The main thing is, Jeff, we want Alaska. Get it for us by stopping that Russian-American—Hudson’s Bay Company treaty. Operations will be carried on in Sitka; and you ought to see a chance to break up their poker game!”

“You mean for me to use *force*?” Jeff demanded incredulously.

“By Heaven, of course use force—in small quantities when it is absolutely necessary. It is all in the secret-service game. Remember, however, that guile is better than force any day. I said to you to block that deal, and I don’t care how you block it, as long as you don’t get us into an international dispute. I hope you do give England some of her own medicine: we owe it to her. Of course, if you get caught in some questionable deal it is at your own risk, because we will have to punish you to satisfy England and to save our face. That is the risk a gentleman takes—the risk of the international spy.”

“What will I give as my apparent mission to Alaska?”

“You are to be, outwardly, a special correspondent to one of our great publications. This is an old joke, of course, but they will think they see through you, if you show a great interest in the proposed cable and our fishing rights in Alaskan waters. I will give you a batch of instructions to look over on your way to Sitka, but, my friend, your real business concerns a bigger fish than halibut! By Heaven, we’ll teach England to build privateers to sink our ships! We’ll show her that the despised Yankee nation—always belittled, always snubbed with well-bred English snobbery—can play this international game as well as any of ’em! And if you win”—and Seward’s soft voice dropped a tone—“America will be your debtor beyond any hope of payment.”

“If I lose?”

“You must not lose. America must never lose; the world’s future is in our keeping.”

“And aren’t you afraid to offer this post to me, a Rebel?” Jeff asked soberly.

“Of course I am not. I’m not a fool, either. Do you take the job?” His tone was casual, unexcited, seemingly almost indifferent.

For a long moment Jeff sat dreaming. Once more his eyes were dark with inner visions; even beyond Seward’s farseeing eyes to follow. Dead men came to life; voices long stilled rang in his ears. Jeff was reliving again the four black years just gone.

The scenes changed with lightning rapidity. He saw the flower of the South going to war. He felt the glory of their early victories; he heard the cheers almost drowning out the faint cry of the wounded and dying. He saw the tide slowly turning as the North gave more and more of her mighty strength; as the frightful drain on Southern manhood began to tell. He was

with Pickett in his hopeless charge—he walked in the path of ruin behind Sherman’s invaders. Once more he saw the tall, lonely figure of the immortal Lee, after the hopeless day at Appomattox; and the image of the tears the young major had shed on that bitter day burned in his eyes still.

As Seward sat waiting, Jeff’s expression changed. This was no time for dreams now: this was his moment of opportunity. His eyes were now hard and bright, scarcely revealing the warm and gallant heart that Seward had always understood so well. The Secretary of State was a man of far-reaching vision; but could he have read the black and bitter thoughts beyond those glittering eyes he would have withdrawn his offer in an instant. He thought he knew this youth, and now, through failing to know him, he had risked a great cause.

His words on Americanism had fallen on deaf ears. He had acted on what he supposed was actual inspiration; and it was beyond his conception that he might be playing into the hands of the enemy. To Jeff, this seemed his moment of tremendous opportunity; but not that for service to America, or yet for building up his own depleted fortunes. Suddenly he knew that it was in his power to deal the hated Union a stinging blow, and at the same time repay England for her late friendship to his homeland. Seward had blundered, he thought; and why should he not take advantage of that blunder? He could atone, in some slight degree, for Southern wrongs.

He was a Rebel still! Seward might not believe that fact now, but he could be easily convinced! The great statesman had been prepared to forsake all scruples in dealing with an enemy—as was the code—and now he might find that a conquered enemy could play the same game. It had been Jeff’s intention to renounce his United States citizenship, disavowing forever a people’s government, and take up his residence in some foreign land. Here was a chance to let flow the poisoned flood of bitterness and hatred that filled his heart.

“I’ll take the offer,” he replied, looking Seward in the eyes. “I am only too glad to get it.”

This was true. He was white with exaltation.

Seward smiled happily. “I thought you would, my boy. I usually don’t make many mistakes in human nature. There can’t be any North or South, or East or West from now on, Jeff—there can only be America. We must all believe that and look to it. There alone lies greatness.”

“I am to start at once?”

“At once—as soon as I can fit you out with credentials and an order from the treasury. You are to go overland, by stage and railroad, as far as San Francisco; then take ship from there. I have arranged by telegraph for you to sail on the *Ethan Allen*, with Captain Skinner.”

“Any further instructions?”

“None—only this. Just remember all the time, Jeff, that you are an American. Not a North Carolinian—just an American. I want you to know the full meaning of the word.”

IV

IN the long, tedious journey between Washington and San Francisco, Jeff had various side lights on America never before glimpsed; and he did not always know what to make of them. His own South was already old and tame, possessing as high a state of civilization as the most of Europe, but this West was wild as the buffalo herds that roamed it, and glittering, glaring, brand new. He saw the march of the colonists who beheld visions in the clouds of dust that all but hid the lumbering wagons; he saw ugly towns rising up on blizzard-swept prairies; he saw Indian villages and mining camps. He wondered about the gaunt stage driver, with little, hard eyes set in the old-leather wrinkles of his face; he was stared at, in rapt amazement, by a crowd of cattlemen who had gathered to meet the stage; he was introduced in spite of himself to the entire stage-load of raw-boned, uncultured frontiersmen and women, who shook him freely by the hand and conversed pleasantly with him. All these things and people he hated and scorned. He was more convinced than ever that the South had been put upon and crushed by an ignoble horde of peasants; that the Republican idea was an abomination and a failure; and that further existence in the United States was more than he could bear.

He was wholly sincere in all this. It was not a pose with him; his belief in the superiority of birth and culture over strength and achievement had, ever since the war, been nursed and cherished until it was an absolute conviction. Nor was he ever a cad, descending to a cheap snob's tricks to impress the humble people. He was secure enough in himself so that he did not care to impress them, in the first place. Throughout the journey his perfect manners never faltered; and while these clear-eyed frontiersmen would have been quick to detect a false front and hilariously tear it down, laughing to scorn in a moment any pose or affectation, they were really secretly impressed with Jeff; and except for irrepressible curiosity, treated him with entire respect. They were even more humble, less presuming than Jeff thought they would be. If in reality he missed the real spirit of the West; if he failed to discern something noble and fine and far-reaching in the struggle of these precursors in the wilderness, it was not because of cheap standards. However mistaken his philosophy, he was devout in it.

He arrived in San Francisco about the middle of August, not more than three weeks after he had left home. As Seward had promised, the *Ethan Allen* was waiting to take him to Alaska.

She proved to be a rather small, but quite comfortable steam schooner, built during the war and having the mechanical improvements that the war developed and improved, including a screw propeller in place of a paddle wheel. Jeff did not, however, feel any increased enthusiasm for the journey. She was merely a trading vessel of an ordinary sort, possessing none of the luxuries such as he used to know on the Mississippi packets; and none of his kind were on board. In these days America was great on the sea as well as on land, and the *Ethan Allen* was manned by Americans rather than by the seafarers of foreign countries; but Jeff's training did not permit companionship with such men as these. To him they were an unfamiliar type: lean, brawny men of Boston. Evidently he was the only passenger on board.

He had hoped to enjoy the captain's company, at least; but now he gave over the idea. Some of the captains in command of the Confederate men-of-war had been officers and gentlemen of the most gallant sort, but evidently the commanders of small traders came of another school. At first he could hardly believe that the short, heavily built old fellow giving commands from the bridge was actually the captain of the ship.

He wore no coat at all, his only insignia was a dingy cap of blue; he bawled like a steer when he gave his orders; and his manner was decidedly not that of a gentleman. Jeff noticed one or two significant things concerning him, however. One of them was that his sailors looked at him with a certain look of trust and confidence which Jeff had seen too many times—in terrible days of the Red Years—ever to mistake. Another was that he seemed to get things done.

On closer inspection Jeff saw that he was a man about sixty years of age, with knotty hands, a chest like a barrel, and a round, good-natured face that was lighted rather frequently with a remarkably pleasant smile. He had rather bright blue eyes, twinkling at times; and was evidently gifted with considerable humor of an obvious kind.

"So you are the important passenger we were told to wait two weeks for," the Captain began cordially. "It's hotter'n a horned toad, ain't it? Why don't you have off your coat?"

Jeff felt like explaining that a gentleman did not go about with his coat off; but he knew that this would be wasting his sweetness on desert air. He

simply protested that he did not feel the heat.

“You needn’t keep your com’ny manners with us,” Captain Skinner informed him. “We’re just plain folks. Say, you’re not English, are you?”

“No. I am from North Carolina.”

“Good. I’m glad you are an American. I just sailed from England, and it sure is good to be back among real Americans. You’re keepin’ your coat on sort of reminded me of them. They’re stiff devils. For my part I don’t want no shakes with ’em.”

“You don’t believe, then, that England is the greatest nation in the world to-day?” Jeff asked gravely.

“Believe what! My Gosh, do I look plumb water-logged to you? England the greatest country! We’ll show England who’s the greatest country, if she ever gets gay with us! My boy, did you ever hear of the United States? Do you know what we’ve accomplished in ninety years? Lor’ love me, I never heard tell of no such question as that before.”

Jeff started to turn away, estranged rather than amused, but he did not have the opportunity. Suddenly the skipper began to bawl, loud and more loudly, until it seemed that the ships beyond the Golden Gate would hear him and come in. He seemed to be calling a name, but what it was Jeff could not tell for sure. It sounded like Moll—long-drawn-out like the name of a family cow—as much as anything else. And now he had his answer.

“Here I am,” some one said from the door of the pilot house. “Uncle Dave, you will call out the fire department with such a voice.”

Jeff looked up, startled by the tone, and saw what he had hardly expected to see on an Alaska-bound trading vessel—a young and undeniably pretty girl. She was not, Jeff felt, his own kind of girl—the kind to whom he had once showed the finest of Southern chivalry—yet to deny that she was pretty would be simply to talk through his tall, silk, fashionable hat! He had an uncomfortable feeling that she was almost beautiful, possessing deep, blue, radiant, and certainly lovely eyes, lively color, pleasant-curving lips and a magnificent crown of corn-colored hair. She spoke rather boldly, Jeff thought; not modestly and quietly as was the way of speaking among the girls he knew. Yet he was a just man, and he had to admit that the voice affected him rather cheerily, and he would not quickly tire of hearing it.

For all these points in her favor, Jeff most certainly and surely disapproved of the girl who now stood at the captain’s side. In the first place, he was shocked at her garb. She wore a midshipman’s uniform—trousers

and all—and though the suit brought out her well-curved little figure in a manner somehow pleasing to the imagination Jeff was sure he didn't like the effect. It wasn't modest, hang it! Girls he knew did not go around in men's pants! She looked somehow too nimble in the outfit, capable and spry and hobbledehoy. Jeff suspected that she was an incorrigible tomboy, a creature which in general he disapproved of. He wouldn't have been surprised to see her go skipping to the tops. Even at that, she was as much as he could expect of Captain Skinner's niece.

Such dignity and courtly grace as the early ante-bellum years demanded in woman were conspicuously absent in Molly. There was not a thing dignified about her. Jeff would not say that she was actually ungraceful, but at least she did not strike the graceful and picturesque poses—hands turned out and chin inclined over shoulder—which the latest books on etiquette recommended. And now Captain Skinner was introducing him to her.

"My dear, this is the young man who is going to sail with us—Mr. Jefferson Sharp. Molly, you ought to heard the question this feller just asked me."

"What was it, Uncle Dave?"

"He just asked me if I didn't think England was the greatest country in the world. Honey, does the old man begin to look foolish in his old age that people say such things to him?"

"There are Americans who really think so," the girl told him, smiling quietly. "There are people who think everything foreign is superior to everything American; they have been told that so many times by foreigners they have begun to believe it."

Jeff stood a trifle more erect. "I wouldn't care to argue the point," he said stiffly. "We all have our views."

"No, we wouldn't want to start an argument that might end in a squabble, considering we are going to have so many days in one another's company," the girl replied. "Of course we can assume you are an American?"

Jeff looked at her with growing displeasure. "By conquest only," he said, bowing slightly. "My home was in North Carolina."

The girl's expression changed: there was something almost like compassion in her bright eyes. "It will be a little hard, at first, to readjust yourself to new conditions. I can well understand that. It may be hard to

consider yourself an American again, to feel as you used to feel, before the war. I'm sure you'll accomplish it in time."

"I never can, I'm afraid, Miss—"

"Miss Forest. Try, anyway, Mr. Sharp. It is worth while, I assure you. A republic makes many mistakes, but it's worth clinging to in the end. Try to forget your grief."

She smiled rather tenderly; and Jeff felt grateful in spite of himself. This girl was of a different caste and class; yet in her was the dream of motherhood, and that had reached out to Jeff. If there was anything on earth of which this lonely, embittered boy stood most in need, it was mothering; and no wonder that she had struck a responsive chord. He had always been easily moved, tender-hearted as a child. Union men who had been taken prisoners by his battalion had cause to know this fact. He looked at her with shining eyes.

Now, as they waited, the ship moved from the dock. Captain Skinner bawled certain orders; a handful of people on the dock waved in farewell. The little waves moved between the ship and the shore.

"We're off," Jeff said quietly.

"Yes. We are saying farewell to America for some weeks, at least." She was still deep in the thoughtful mood of a moment ago, as she watched the shore recede. "Farewell to the land of friendly faces!"

"And I guess it is farewell to civilization, too."

"Yes, we are leaving civilization behind us—the kind of civilization that Lincoln believed in—the kind that America stands for." She looked at him mysteriously. "It will be different from what you think, though. It may be exactly to your liking." So they stood and watched the little ship leaping into the waves, and their youthful dreams no man could know.

V

MOLLY and Jeff made friends rather quickly as the *Ethan Allen* sailed northward. While the girl did not conform to Jeff's idea of a lady, at least she was agreeable company, quick-witted and bright, and highly appreciative of his faultless courtesy and constant—though somewhat patronizing—attentions. Her business in the North was simply to keep her uncle company, she said; she would return from Sitka on this same ship.

They had rather pleasant times together. They fed the gulls that trailed them, they watched the mysterious shore line, they had long, friendly talks on the deck. Jeff told her much about his past life, but he was not so garrulous as to confess his real mission in the North. He had too good manners to tell her his aristocratic views, and he was not in the least tempted even to hint at his viewpoint regarding the Union and America. He realized that Molly, sympathetic and generous though she was, could not be a good listener to disloyal talk. Her views on such matters were already clear.

As the days passed and the North Star neared, Jeff began to experience a growing interest in the land by which the ship passed. Here was certainly the wilderness: a country inconceivably vast, unknown, almost unpeopled, dark with unbroken leagues of forest. Together they saw deep bays in which a ship had never come to rest, far mountain ranges white with snows that had never held a white man's footprint, wonderful sylvan scenes that filled them with delight only to fade at once in the haze. Jeff was stirred with the wild beauty of the land, and at the same time he found himself curiously mystified and thoughtful.

There were nights of startling beauty that wakened strange fancies and unfamiliar moods in the two travelers who sat on the moonlit deck. There was a vastness here that Jeff had never thought of before. Indeed, the sea and the land and the sky were created on a scale that filled him with silent awe. He felt little and futile in comparison, and the things that he lived by seemed of no great moment after all—but he soon fought away such vagrant thoughts as these. In such wondrous nights the two sat for long hours with hardly a word, stirred by the magic of the sea in the moonlight, listening to its eternal, moaning voice.

"Do you suppose any one will ever live up here?" he asked Molly one night, pointing to the darkened shore. "Can any one exist in such a place?"

“People live up here now,” was the girl’s reply. “Hardy trappers and miners, not to mention the natives, gain their living from this wilderness.”

“How can anybody bear to do it! It just means throwing his life away.”

The girl sat with her chin resting in her pink palm, and her gaze was a thousand miles away. “I don’t think they would agree with you. I know that I don’t agree with you, Mr. Sharp. In the happy years before the war—did you consider that you were throwing your life away?”

“Of course not. No one could have lived a more perfect, idyllic life than I did. Why, I didn’t have a worry. Nothing but pleasant things to do from morning till night—”

“That is the way I thought it was. But if one of those hardy, hairy frontiersmen I speak of had been in your place, he would have thought that his time was worse than wasted.”

“Oh, I suppose one man’s drink is another’s poison. But you must remember—those men are a different breed from me. They haven’t the same traditions, the same precedents, nothing of the same tastes. They are practically barbarians—knowing nothing of refinement, culture—anything that matters. I don’t suppose they could be happy in a gentleman’s station—simply because they would feel out of place.”

“What is culture—refinement—compared to achievement, Mr. Sharp? Where would culture and refinement be except for the achievement that has made them possible? I’ll tell you why those men I speak of couldn’t be contented in your old sphere. Of course, if they had been trained to it, as you were, they would like it well enough, but they could never be transplanted now. Those men must have work to do, or they waste away. They must have trial and stress—adventure—battle. They know their keen eyes will dull if they don’t have the light-and-shadow of the forest to keep them trained; their trigger finger will grow lax, their muscles soften. They must have a patch of woodland to clear for sowing; they must build a trail through the woods. It isn’t such luxury as you had, Mr. Sharp, that makes America great. It is these trail-breakers in the forest. And I don’t know what will happen to us when the last of the land is tamed, and no trails are left to blaze.

“Yours was a beautiful life, lovely as a dream, I suppose, but I don’t know what common good could come of it,” she went on, warming to her subject. “Those men in the woods yonder are building for the future—they are making an America that will be mankind’s hope in years to come. Because of the efforts of such men as those—such men as are now peopling the West—we will have a country where the common man has some kind of

a chance—where the mass of people will be better fed and better clothed and happier than any race of people have ever been since the world began. When a man builds in this country he does not build for a king, or a noble—he isn't making something that a king's hired army is going to come along and take away from him. He builds for all the people.

“Only the bravest and the toughest can live out there in the woods. Only the brave and the hardy have ever dared come to America; that is why this continent is now peopled with a brood of eagles. And they can't stay still, those eagle-children. They must ever fly farther into the wilderness. They are essentially home-makers, not just spoilers, and future generations will reap the reward of their courage and strength. They may not be gentlemen and ladies in the sense you use the word, but you can never say they have thrown away their lives.”

Jeff looked at the girl with widening eyes. He had not dreamed that she could be so fervent. The subject had evidently stirred her to the depths of a nature which he realized now was neither vulgar nor superficial. He found, in the days that followed, that her words lingered in his consciousness, and particularly he retained the picture of her as she was speaking them—seated on the deck with the moonlight in her eyes, her strong little hands occasionally gesturing in her earnestness, her lovely face lifted to his.

He was glad to have gained an appreciation of her; for it seemed that their time of parting was near. The ship was rapidly approaching its destination. One afternoon they came in sight of Baronof Island, the seat of the capital city of the Czar's American possessions; and as night lowered they steamed into the harbor.

The last of August is almost always lovely in southeastern Alaska; but this night turned out to be perfect beyond his imagination. It was as if nature were outdoing herself for his special benefit. The stars were out in countless legions and were imaged in the harbor depths; as the moon rolled up around the curve of the earth, the wilderness at the edge of the sea became an incredible fairyland of mystery and loveliness. Always susceptible to beauty, a strange, lonely, poetic mood overcame him; and he found himself regretting that the journey was over.

Surely such regrets were foolish and inconsistent in one of his standards and ideas. What was there about those two commonplace people, Captain Skinner and his niece, that he should regret leaving them. Perhaps the real explanation lay in the uncertainty of the future, the unhappy prospect of many weeks spent in an inhospitable, bleak, and dismal trading post in the

North Pacific. He felt that he knew all too well what Sitka would be like. He was prepared for weeks of hopeless boredom while he waited for a ship to take him home.

Partly because he was so enthralled with the beauty of the night, and partly because he took little interest in the small Russian city that marked the journey's end, he made no attempt to watch for the first light of the port. As a result, the city burst upon his view like a place of enchantment, up out of the empty air. There were lights everywhere—stretching far along the harbor like a string of gleaming jewels, climbing the hills, illuminating what seemed to be fair-sized buildings. Sitka looked considerably larger than he supposed it would be. Perhaps it was only his long absence from the centers of civilization that made it seem so imposing; yet surely it promised more than he had hoped for at first. It was the last outpost, the farthest place from anywhere, the final limit of the Czar's dominions, yet it looked like a center of civilization.

"It seems to be quite a place," he observed to Molly, who stood beside him. "I suppose it is the effect of the lights."

"It is quite a place," the girl answered. "You don't understand. This is the capital of a Russian province. The majesty of the Czar carries even here. Besides, it is the center of everything in Alaska. It is one of the fur-trading centers of the world. Almost every skin taken over all this vast province goes through Sitka before it is shipped. Transpacific boats stop here for ice. Look at the ships!"

Jeff's eyes opened wide as he saw there were a half dozen large vessels of various nations and kinds lying at anchor. And now he was aware of an even more amazing thing.

He suddenly heard music. It came stealing over the water, hallowed by distance, sublimely sweet in the hushed darkness. It was thin and nebulous as moonlight itself; it did not seem like sound, but only an incredible fragrance of the night. This was not the music of a savage people; a native dance to a pagan god. There was no blood-curdling beat of a tomtom in accompaniment. Such music as this was the heritage of old civilizations, the voice of ancient cities in far lands. This was not America, new and raw, that spoke across the water. It was the music, the articulate soul of far-off, unhappy kingdoms beyond the interminable seas.

"It's Strauss, isn't it?" the girl whispered at his side. "It comes from Baronof Castle—the governor's house on the hill."

But Jeff did not answer or turn his head. He had forgotten the girl's existence.

VI

PRINCE MAKSOUTOF, charged with the governing of all Muscovite possessions beyond the Pacific, and his aid, the young Count Yanovisk, were themselves down to the quay to greet the young special correspondent from America. Word of his coming had been sent by telegraph to San Francisco, and thence had been carried by a ship that had sailed for Sitka a few days before the *Ethan Allen*. Both men bowed with courteous grace over his hand.

"Welcome to Russian-America," Yanovisk addressed him in perfect English. "The journey, I hope, was not too tedious."

Jeff glowed with pleasure. This was what he loved. These men were gentlemen, much nearer to him than his own countrymen whom he had met aboard ship. Count Yanovisk was a distinguished-looking youth, clean-shaven except for a small, carefully waxed mustache; and until he heard the amazing explanation, Jeff was considerably puzzled by his garb. Not entirely concealed by a beautifully tailored military cape was gay-hued raiment that seemed to belong more to the Celestial Kingdom than to dark and wintry Russia. Surely this was not the accepted fashion in Alaska. Prince Maksoutof had no such attire; he was garbed in the conventional evening dress of European courts, broadcloth evening suit, buckled knee-trousers and silk stockings.

Evidently Count Yanovisk guessed his thought. "You wonder at my dress, yes?" he asked, smiling. "No wonder, sir! To-night the Governor entertains with a masked ball in honor of Countess Vasilkov, wife of the commander of one of his Majesty's ships of war, at present in the harbor. Will you come?"

"You honor me," Jeff replied, falling at once into this strange, courtly atmosphere. "I confess I expected no such treat."

"We have such affairs frequently here. One must pass the time."

The Governor spoke now, and his aid quickly translated. "His Grace repeats the invitation. If you have no costume, come as you are; the host himself is not in costume, as you see. The ladies and some of the younger men have tried to put on something suitable to the occasion."

"I am only too delighted to come." Jeff's voice showed plainly enough his sincerity. "You must give me a moment or two—"

"Plenty of time. There is always plenty of time, in Russia. The Governor must return to the Castle, but I will wait for you, if I may."

"You are only too good, Count Yanovisk. I will keep you only a moment —"

The Governor spoke again, in soft and purring Russian, the tone of which conveyed a welcome almost as plain as Yanovisk's translation; and then turned back to the Castle. Jeff and the Count climbed up the gangplank to the deck of the *Ethan Allen*, and the former went to his quarters to dress.

He was in a wonderful mood. Surely he was among his own people. Here were the things that made life worth living: the gayety, the titles, the atmosphere and tradition of European courts. He fancied that his own South might have picked up something of this same dignity and grandeur if the war had been won, rather than lost to a Republican rabble. Here was the best of Europe, transported to these far, lost, northern shores.

He did not doubt his ability to fit in. He was especially trained for just this sort of thing. He would show these proud nobles from another land that he was no boor, no backwoods rail-splitter. Later he would show them how he stood in regard to Republican governments in general; the information he had procured from Seward would, when turned over to friendly England, deal a blow to the Union that would not be quickly forgotten. And now, with shining eyes and quickened spirits, he began to make ready for the festivities.

Only for one second was he in doubt what to wear. He too would dress for the ball! An idea of considerable daring had come to him: once and for all he would show the distinguished company who he was and where he stood. He went to a certain portmanteau of which all through the journey he had taken the most detailed care, and from tissue wrappings took out a suit of gray clothes.

It was his own uniform, bearing the insignia of a major in the Army of the Confederacy. In this he would make his first public appearance at the governor's court. No one could possibly misunderstand. By this one act he would renounce the government that sponsored him.

He realized the full import of his act; it was no small insult to the government he represented. He knew that when Seward heard that he had presented himself in the Governor's home in Rebel uniform, the garb that

typified enmity to the Union, he would be instantly recalled, even though he were Seward's own son. The fact that he was not an official envoy and that he was wearing the uniform to a fancy-dress ball could not cloud the issue in the least. However, before Seward ever heard of his act, he would have sailed for England, there to make his home.

His was a distinguished figure when he had donned the clothes. Jeff was a handsome youth to start with, and now it appeared that the dress uniform of a Confederate major had been designed solely to set off his good looks. Regardless of his opinion of Americans in general, Yanovisk was profoundly impressed by this young Southerner who now joined him on the deck.

"You will be—what you say?—the sensation!" Yanovisk told him with enthusiasm. "All will wonder who is this most distinguished officer. I may assume, then, that you bore arms on the Southern side in the great war?"

"Yes, Count. I was a Rebel. I hope it will not prejudice you against me —"

"On the contrary, you have risen in my esteem. My friend, it is true that his Majesty, the Czar, showed no face of friendship to the South during your trial. It is not disloyal to him, however, to assure you that most of us—not the peasantry—but the landed people and the governing classes—were praying for you to win. I may say that the noble class in every land was with you. We believe you stood for the old standards—the inherent right of gentlemen to rule—and besides—but perhaps such a thought is better left unspoken to a citizen of the United States."

Jeff guessed what that thought was—the antipathy of all aristocracies to the new Republican experiment in America—and he smiled in complete understanding. "Your sympathy is appreciated—even though the Union still endures."

"And surely your publications are showing wisdom in selecting gentlemen to represent them in foreign lands—even though they have to go to rebellious States to find them. But the Governor expects us—"

The men turned to go, and the Count gave Jeff a small, black silk mask to wear when he entered the ballroom. "You are unknown anyway, so you really do not need it, but it adds to the sport," Yanovisk explained. "We will make the ladies guess!"

It did not occur to Jeff, as he walked with the Russian count across the dock, that he had forgotten anything in particular. He had done so, however; he had forgotten to say good-by to Molly. He simply did not think of her,

otherwise he would have kept the governor himself waiting to thank her for the pleasure she had given him. This man Sharp was no one's cad. He might occasionally suffer from wrong standards, but his courtesy was as natural as his breath; and even toward those whom he considered his social inferiors it never flagged. He simply failed to think of her—uninvited to the ball, probably standing on the deck, wistfully listening to the faint strains of distant music. His intense delight with Russian-America and all this situation in which he found himself had absorbed him to the exclusion of all other interests.

The two men made their way over the quay, then climbed the hill toward an immense log structure with radiant windows. This was Baronof Castle, named in honor of one of the early governors of the province. A moment later Jeff stood at the door of the ballroom, looking upon a strange and significant scene.

He saw a long room, ablaze with light, and a bare floor of some beautiful rare wood which, polished to glass-like smoothness with infinite hand labor, reflected the mellow gleam of countless candles. The walls were hung with rare canvasses—portraits of great adventurers who had made Alaskan history, of powerful princes who had once left their far-distant courts to govern this vast, wild province beyond the sea, of lovely ladies, wives and daughters of past governors whose grace was now a legend and whose beauty was dust—treasures the value of which even Jeff, not wholly unfamiliar with fine art, could not guess. Between the paintings were trophies of the chase: white sheep from the high ranges of the mainland, huge moose, caribou with tree-like antlers. There were fresh flowers in profusion from the governor's hothouses on the island; the curtains and draperies, exquisite things in raw silk, had been brought in from China in trade for a king's ransom in glossy fur. A regimental band, composed of bearded Muscovites in uniform, played strange, alien music at the end of the long room.

The Alaskan aristocracy had gathered. To the soft rhythm of an unfamiliar waltz—a haunting, plaintive, dreamy thing in the minor—the flower of the North was dancing. At first Jeff could not distinguish the details of the picture; his senses were drugged by the sheer beauty of the pageant, the jubilee of color; the music blurred his vision like wine. Now, looking closer, he began to notice individuals—Russian women in the garb of every land, all wearing masks that could not conceal a dark and luring beauty; dark-eyed girls, doubtless the daughters of high officials of the Company; and now and then an Oriental-looking maiden whose high cheek

bones suggested that she might be what the Russians knew as creoles—the offspring of crossed races.

Dancing with these ladies were the men who governed and garrisoned this empire at the edge of the world. There were officers from the post; and although military tradition did not permit them to don fancy-dress, their loose, full-dress uniforms contributed to the color of the scene; there were officials of all kinds, some in masquerade clothes, some in their regular uniform of the Ministry of Finance; there were adventurers, remittance men, scapegrace black sheep who had been sent out to the far province to save a noble family's name. His Reverence, the Bishop of the Cathedral, danced with the wife of the Governor; the learned doctor who headed the Sitka school—ranked as a seminary throughout Russia—entertained a tall, queenly woman in whose honor the ball was given, the wife of a Russian naval officer resplendent in gold lace.

Jeff had seen many fancy-dress balls, yet never one like this. To the Southern youth it afforded a new and thrilling experience. In just what way it differed from masquerade affairs in the United States he found it at first difficult to determine, even though the difference was so real that the bluntest perceptions could not remain unaware of it. Even the music was different. It expressed more than American music. It might have been the folk-melody of the steppes—an old, unhappy song of an enslaved people who toiled and died in the dark night while their rulers danced. The melody was ineffably romantic. Hearts yearned, eyes brimmed with living light; and in the warmth and beauty, many things—many dark and ugly truths—could be wholly forgotten.

There was a brilliance here that Americans simply could not achieve, though at twenty times the cost. Jeff was sure of this fact. Even in the old South, where social lines were rather tightly drawn and there was some indication of a landed aristocracy, he had not seen this; and in northern United States it was out of the question. Why, almost any one could feel at home at the crude affairs that made up Yankee social life. Baronof Castle was the seat of government of an American province, but rich and ancient courts had given it their magic.

As Jeff watched he was overcome with admiration and carried away as if by a dream. This was the thing he believed in! Only in monarchies, he thought—where noble birth received its due and men recognized a firmly established aristocracy—could such glory be achieved. These people were like gods, far above and careless of the common run of men. In his romantic

imagination, in the eyes of embittered youth, the girls were all princesses, the men nobles of high degree.

Yet it was something more than the mere brilliance of a noble gathering. There was an all-pervading spirit of romance, a half-sad abandon in the dance that could only be explained by the fact that the dancers were, in a sense, exiles in a far land. They were a little group of kindred spirits cast away in the wilderness. Even here, where the rough environment tended to brutalize and coarsen, they remembered their obligation of birth and blood; and for their own salvation tried to re-enact the gay nights of St. Petersburg. Jeff was thrilled and stirred as he had rarely been in his lifetime.

Yanovisk took him into the ballroom, and in a short time he had met a number of the leading figures of the colony, particularly a group of the Governor's immediate friends who had come to the ball unmasked. He shook hands with Semanof, in command of the Sitka barracks and who, as a cadet, had seen service in the Crimean War; with Spaskii, the Czar's commissioner; and with Templeton, an Englishman with no business in particular, whom Jeff guessed to be a secret agent of some kind.

He was a powerful, active man of about forty years of age, square-jawed, cold-eyed, evidently a man of resolute purpose and domineering ways. He was not, Jeff thought, a typical English aristocrat—sensitive, amiable and usually likable. This was the kind of man that nations chose for their more or less questionable missions, somewhat ruthless and not over-scrupulous. He was undoubtedly a gentleman, however aristocratic in his views; and for no other reason than a long-nurtured bias in favor of England Jeff was prepared to like him. Besides, his opening remark made Jeff glow with pleasure.

"You do us proud with that uniform," he said. "I am glad to see you were on the decent side."

Jeff was not so sure about the young adventurer, Ivan Staritsa, a nobleman who for no apparent reason had left Moscow for an indefinite visit beyond the Pacific. The word had got around that he had left at night, and had crossed Siberia with somewhat surprising haste. He looked like a hot-tempered individual—his eyes magnetic and almost red, his black brows lowering, his mouth savage and sensual—and Jeff found little to admire in his thin, deeply lined, but somewhat aristocratic face.

His manner on introduction was not at all gratifying to the young Southerner. "So I am having the great pleasure to meet an American, yes?" he remarked somewhat unpleasantly. Staritsa had been to school in England, but his Russ accent carried through his attempts at English.

“What has America to do up here? Perhaps we are to have a republic—with a rail-splitting Aleut for President!”

“Only the Aleuts have no rails!” one of his companions laughed. “They are expert at building barabaras, however, of mud and alder boughs. That should qualify them, is it not, for the presidency of this Alaska! Perhaps you, Mr. Sharp, will be teaching them how to vote!”

Jeff found that he took their gibes at the martyred Lincoln in astonishingly bad part. It was true that Lincoln was not yet considered, except by a few of the older and more thoughtful southerners, a friend of Dixie as well as of the North, and it might be that, in respect to his Rebel uniform, the two Russians had spoken thus purely to please him; yet the young man felt his collar tighten about his neck, and he found it difficult to join in their laughter.

“How is the land of the free?” Staritsa went on. “The Utopia where all men are created equal?”

It might be that Jeff had no more use for the doctrine of the freedom and equality of all men than these two smiling Muscovites before him; but curiously enough, he felt no impulse to explain that fact to them, nor to tell them that he had himself lost faith in a popular government. Indeed, he momentarily forgot his own carefully nurtured opinions on the subject and had a ridiculous impulse to wipe forcibly their superior smiles from their noble mouths.

Of all the men he met, Baron Karl Pavlof, Staritsa’s companion, was the most forcible and in many ways the most interesting. He was as tall as Jeff himself, agile as a cat, and would have been strikingly handsome except for a long, dark bullet scar on his cheek. He was a man in the prime of life—between thirty-five and forty-five—with a cold, clear eye and a thin steady hand almost black with hair. He was clean-shaven, but the hair of his round head was glossy black as commercial seal fur.

Baron Karl had drunk deep to-night of the fluid fire that is vodka, but the only outward sign of his semi-drunkenness was a slight loosening of his fine lips and a certain rather unpleasant imperiousness of manner. Jeff was not surprised to learn that he was one of the principal holders of the Russian-American Company stock—in fact, he acted as if he owned the place—but it was disconcerting in the extreme to see Sergius Spaskii, the royal commissioner, and Colonel Semanof of the garrison openly toadying to him. He had fondly presumed that only in republics, in lands lost to the glory and ideals of Europe, did men lick the boots of wealth. He had dreamed that in

long-established aristocratic governments it was virtue and worth, blood and birth, which men revered and died for. He was further perturbed when he learned that Baron Karl was not born to high office at all, but had risen to power and a title through various transactions that were not altogether savory. Of course, in the meantime he had acquired imperialistic views that would have amazed the Czar himself. The man's power, however, could not be doubted; and Jeff guessed at once he would play a large part in the international negotiations to come.

But presently Jeff forgot these disquieting thoughts as he turned his mind to the pleasures of the evening. The dance was in full swing by now; the musicians played with increasing ardor and spirit; and eyes were bright and hearts aglow as Jeff remembered them in many a festival of his youth, in a warmer land under a more genial sun.

He wanted to dance. The idea struck him all at once. It was not just a vague instinct with him, a mere suggestion conveyed by the dreamy music, but the firmest kind of a conviction. Nor did he wish to dance with himself. Looking out with impersonal interest on the dance floor he suddenly saw some one whom he fancied for a partner.

The young lady who took his eye wore a rather bold costume, considering the standards of the Queen who reigned in England, but since she was evidently a Russian princess of high degree, she could wear it in a way that was only charming. It seemed to be the garb of a harem queen—silken pantaloons, dainty feet showing in sandals, and certain veils through which the eye traced a slim, girlish form. The candles made her white shoulders seem like silk with a faint rosy shade glowing through; and Jeff's arm longed to encircle them.

Shades of Jefferson Davis, how she could dance! Now Jeff found delightful confirmation of his favorite philosophy; only one of the old monarchies blessed with a high-born ruling class, devotees of art and beauty, could give birth to a girl like this! Many generations of nobles were needed to bring forth such fruit! How the young Russians swarmed around her, jealous for her smiles. How she carried off the rôle of a harem girl—just shy enough to be appealing, sensational without being vulgar, wholly adorable and charming!

"The girl with the yellow hair—she's the one I want to meet," Jeff confided to his sponsor, Yanovisk. "I want to entreat her for a dance."

"The yellow hair—yes? By Saint Michael, my friend—I cannot recognize her in the mask! Most of the girls I know, but that angel—she

must be one with whom I have not great acquaintance, yes? Surely, we will try for you—”

It turned out that they made a remarkably successful try. The girl in the harem dress not only granted Jeff’s plea for a place on her program, but with provoking and conscienceless audacity, gave him the next dance, that had been reserved for some one else. As he glided forth with her, he made the startling discovery who this some one was.

The handsome nobleman who came striding across the ballroom to claim the dance and at first could not apparently credit his own senses was no other than Baron Karl Pavlof, the power to whom the Royal Governor himself bowed down. Jeff caught one glance at his angry countenance, identifying him surely by the pistol scar that now, in his rage, was like a livid brand across his white cheek; and the young man knew that his Alaskan adventures had definitely commenced. In a moment, however, he forgot Baron Karl completely.

He failed to see his scowls, and what is still more extraordinary, he failed to see anything else in the room. It was only by instinct that he avoided serious collisions as he guided his partner about the floor. His whole vision was centered on the girl in his arms. He wanted to yell for joy.

VII

JEFF felt an inordinate desire to exchange confidences with the girl who danced so lightly in his arms, but he did not know quite how to go about it. She evidently did not understand English, a tongue known to a surprising number of well-bred Muscovites; and she shook her head at his query. Jeff, of course, spoke no Russian. It was a difficult situation until he made the happy discovery that the girl spoke French.

Jeff's own French was extremely bad, but through the medium of that tongue he was now able to convey a few primitive thoughts. It was even more difficult to understand her French, and whether because it was worse than his, which seemed impossible, or better, he could not tell. Certainly there was a divergence somewhere. When he saw the smile that lingered about her lips he concluded that his command over the tongue of courts was even worse than he thought; but since there was no scorn in her smile—only girlish amusement—it did not hurt his feelings a particle. Indeed, he would have gladly displayed further ignorance—really, it was forgetfulness in his case—if by so doing he could make her smile flower into a laugh.

He talked on bravely, yet he found that he had a thousand thoughts the French words for which he could not remember. Perhaps it was the music, perhaps because he was becoming senile, that he had to combat an almost irresistible desire to tell her all about his boyhood, his mother, his battle experiences, and his views—everything that was particularly dear to him. He wanted to find out all about her—a feat which to accomplish politely would have been difficult enough had she talked his language, and which was wholly impossible in French. The Regimental band, though playing heavenly music, were an unsatisfactory outfit. They purposely cut the dances short.

“And may I see you again soon?” he asked, as soon as he dared. At least this was what he meant to say; and assisted by her woman's intuition, she understood perfectly. He awaited her answer with a ridiculous amount of ill-concealed suspense.

“It would please me immensely,” she replied.

He gulped and gasped. “When?”

“To-night.”

His face paled; and he wondered if he had misunderstood. Could he be mistaken in thinking that "*cette nuit*" meant to-night?"

"Eh?" he echoed stupidly. "Did you say to-night?"

"Yes, if you like. You may escort me home in a little while. I am almost tired with dancing. Say in an hour?"

"Sooner, if you like. It can't be too soon for me."

"You are very kind. I will run out—into the garden—at half-past twelve. You may be ready then."

He felt an insane desire to hasten this already auspicious acquaintance, and he blundered on in execrable French. "You know, I believe I have met you somewhere before. There is something about your face—what I can see of it—that suggests some one I know."

"Yes? It is not very flattering—that you should meet me—and then forget me."

"But we have met, haven't we? Believe me, I will never forget you again. Perhaps I just saw you, on the street. Perhaps you have been South?"

"Not very far South. Have you ever been to Alaska before?"

"No—"

"Then it doesn't seem very likely, does it. Now the music has stopped. I must ask Baron Karl's forgiveness. You Americans—are so masterful!"

Was she laughing at him? By Jove, the Americans *were* masterful. He'd like to see any other people who excelled them in this quality! In thinking about this he forgot, for the moment, that he had mentally renounced America for England, and was planning soon to disavow his American citizenship.

"I wish you would not—beg any one's forgiveness," he told her earnestly. "You have the right to dance with whom you please. He may own the place, but you do not have to coddle him. I will be back soon for another waltz."

He did come back, as soon as he dared, but he was not successful in getting another dance. There was too much foreign competition. Shortly after twelve he lost track of her altogether.

He immediately slipped from the ballroom in search of the gardens. The time set for the assignation was not yet at hand; but he did not care to risk

keeping her waiting and perhaps missing her altogether. He walked around the great structure of the castle, and in a moment found himself in the glory of the gardens.

The beauty of this late August night still endured; and now Jeff was in a mood to appreciate it. The moon was hung in the topmost arch of the sky, and its light cast a strange and unearthly spell over the man and the place. Shadows were dark and mysterious; the low shrubs were weird, black shapes, the sight of the sleeping flowers quickened into life a dear and true philosophy that blessed him for a moment and then passed into darkness.

Southeastern Alaska was always blessed by a glory of flowers. Having only a few short weeks of abundant sunlight, they seem to pour out their hearts in their one brief season; and the air was simply laden with their fragrance. Jeff was a tender-hearted youth, susceptible to the fragile loveliness of blossoms; and seeing them, he did not at first remember why he was here. It did not occur to him that there might be cause for haste. As he was somewhat ahead of time, he supposed that the girl was somewhere in the mansion and that he had the gardens to himself.

Such was not the case. Presently he heard her call in the farther shadows.

It was an odd and somewhat disconcerting sound, faintly heard above the music from the open windows and coming so unexpectedly in his moment of deep peace. It was not a loud sound; yet he was not at all inclined to disregard it. In his fancy it had an anguished, repressed quality, as if it either had been an involuntary utterance of one who was trying to conceal a great trouble, or else it had slipped out between a man's strong fingers.

Jeff did the only possible thing that his training permitted. He ran to investigate the sound. This was a new land to him; the game was new, too, and he had no idea how the cards lay. And presently, in a little open place between the shrubs, he came upon a curious scene.

It was revealed but dimly in the moonlight; yet its significance was not lost on him. There were but two actors: the girl in the Turkish costume whom he had come to meet, and a tall man in evening clothes. As the latter turned, resenting Jeff's intrusion, the moon showed his face but vaguely; but because it was all ghostly and white except for one dark mark on his cheek, the Southerner recognized him at once. At present his arm encircled the girl, pinning her arms to her sides, and she did not seem to be struggling. This latter point might have had a world of meaning for Jeff, had he not known

surely that the steel-wire strength of that arm made struggle impossible. With his free hand he was just reaching to remove her mask.

Jeff was not a fool to rush in and disturb another man's recreation. He knew that rough sport of this kind had been indulged in in moonlit gardens many times before, to the amusement of every one present. Kisses have been stolen for some years without serious public harm. Jeff had many instincts of a knight, but his name was not Don Quixote, and he had no idea of making himself a nuisance. In this case, however, his course was clear. The girl had cried out in real distress; Jeff had not mistaken the need behind the repressed call that had reached him across the gardens. Her strained posture now, the very contour of her form in the dim light, showed how hateful this moment was to her.

The Russian could not help but see Jeff's approach, and he straightway favored him with the supreme insult of seeming indifference. It was not until the Southerner spoke that he deigned him a glance.

"It's not done," Jeff told him, rather casually. He knew the code, this boy from the South.

"Yes?" The Russian grinned at him in unmistakable contempt. "Oh—it is the young American who favors us—one of the brave and the free. Their freedom marks them in any company."

His accent was distinctly foreign, but Jeff did not misunderstand. Meanwhile, Baron Karl made no motion to release the girl.

Because he was a boy and proud, because he wished to play this game in a way that became him, Jeff took time to light a cigarette. It can be said for him that his hand shook hardly at all, and that he touched the match flare to the end of the cigarette the first time he tried. "If no one objects—" he observed, with a palpable coolness.

"Baron Karl, the young lady doesn't seem to appreciate you," he went on. "It isn't the fashion, in America, to entertain young ladies against their will. Will you let her go freely, or must I"—and Jeff made a little gesture—"choke you until you do."

In his amazement at these words Baron Karl's vigilance relaxed for a single second, and the girl took the opportunity to slip out of his arms. It was at this point that Jeff realized the affair was somehow getting beyond him. It had aspects now that he did not fully understand. Heretofore it had seemed a mere detached adventure into which he had stumbled: a half-drunken libertine making himself obnoxious to a lady. Now the episode seemed to be

weaving itself into the fabric of his own life. The surprising thing that wakened these realizations was that instead of running away, the girl remained on the scene. She was free now of Karl's arms, but she did not flee into the Castle. Instead, she took a place slightly to one side of and between the two men, and stood as if waiting.

For what she was waiting Jeff could not guess. He only knew that she kept her eyes firmly fixed not on her rescuer, but on the Russian. So intently she watched that even through the slits of her mask, Jeff saw her eyes glitter.

She seemed to him to be standing on guard.

"I can't tell you what a satisfaction it would be to have you attempt to lay your hands on me," the Russian told him. "I think you have made yourself as objectionable as even an American would care to, for one night, Sharp. You have interfered in a matter of which you know nothing. This is not United States—this is Russian-America. You were not called upon to defend a lady. I know every one who was invited by the Governor, and this girl was not on the list. She is probably a half-breed from the village. You should learn to respect the customs of the land you visit; for instance, when one gentleman is trying to amuse himself with a girl of this class, another does not interfere with him."

"No matter what he does, I suppose. Well, thank Heaven the customs of the United States of America are not those of Russian-America." His voice did not hold so steady now; it had lost the cold and careless quality that still marked the Russian's. He was a younger man, not so tried; and the Russian leered as he sensed his growing advantage.

"I ask you to retract what you said about her, too," Jeff went on as steadily as he could. "While it does not affect the fact that I would save her, if I could, from your insults—just the same, imputations of mixed blood do not go in my country. The girl is not a native—"

"No." The girl spoke clearly in the English tongue. "I am an American."

She lifted her mask. Dim though the light was, Jeff knew her instantly. She was Molly Forest, his companion on the *Ethan Allen*.

VIII

At any other time, Jeff might have felt himself the victim of a colossal joke. This was the girl whose charm an hour before had carried him off his feet, whom he had danced with and flattered and talked to in wretched French. His Russian princess had turned out the tomboy niece of Captain Skinner; and if time had permitted, he might have remembered with acute embarrassment some of the grandiose thoughts he had entertained regarding her. Fortunately for his peace of mind, the situation left room for no such reflections. The drama of the moment carried him far above them.

It might have been that he knew one second of overwhelming surprise, but any intense regret that his ideals had been so shattered was for the moment spared him. His mind was still rather busy with the Muscovite.

“What a pleasant surprise!” he was saying. “Two Americans! Certainly I must leave you two alone together. I trust I may see you again, Mr. Sharp?”

Jeff was trembling now, but with really great effort he made his voice sound cool and clear. “Any time you like. I am always at your service, Baron Karl.”

“Indeed. Perhaps we can arrange a meeting that will be really diverting to both of us.”

No one present misunderstood him, and although Jeff’s face was white, it was with boyish anger rather than fear. Jeff had seen too much service, for all his youth he had drunk too deeply of life, to be terrorized by the nobleman’s threat. “Yes,” he agreed, “we can settle everything to the complete satisfaction of both of us.”

“You are too obliging. I will certainly keep it in mind.”

With a final, scornful smile the Russian turned and instantly vanished in the shadow. The two from America were indeed left alone. So intensely were they aware of each other’s presence that it was as if they had the whole world to themselves.

Jeff, who had held up very creditably his end of the conversation with the Russian nobleman, could think of nothing whatever to say to Molly. He simply stood and looked at her, seemingly unable to articulate. But Molly was not in the least aware of his growing embarrassment. She was seeing

visions, and what they were could be guessed only by the curious widening of her eyes and the startling paleness of her cheeks.

“Oh, how I hate him!” she exclaimed at last. “Jeff, you won’t duel with him, will you?”

The young Southerner blessed her for bringing up the subject. It had saved a situation that was beginning to be ghastly. “I’ll have to duel him, Molly, if he challenges. I won’t challenge him, if that’s what you mean—though Heaven knows he deserves it.”

“Oh, he will challenge you, I know his type! But Jeff, I want you to promise me you won’t fight him.”

“You wouldn’t have me show the white feather, Molly.” He smiled into her wide eyes, somehow pleased with himself. “You are too good a friend of mine to want me to be disgraced. Of course, I will have to keep to the code.”

“What is the code to me!” she demanded indignantly. “What do I care what he thinks. Jeff, I know about that man. He is an international character. One of the men I danced with told me it’s his regular practice to challenge and kill those who get in his way. He is a dead shot and always kills his man.”

“Don’t worry about it now, anyway. Men like that usually bark worse than they bite. I have an engagement, you remember, to take you home. Hadn’t we better start?”

“Yes—but I won’t sleep any, considering the trouble I got you into—the threats of that wicked man.” She led the way along a gravel path out of the gardens. “I shouldn’t have come, Jeff. I never will learn. I might have known trouble would come of it. I just couldn’t resist coming.”

Jeff smiled rather grimly. “Well, you had a good time, didn’t you? It seemed to me there was quite a rush for your attentions. Yanovisk was so taken with my Confederate uniform that he predicted I would be the sensation of the evening. It didn’t turn out to be the case.”

“Just the same, I heard many a girl ask about you—you were never so handsome, even though your costume is out of date. I suppose you can’t ever forgive me.”

“Forgive you—for what?”

“For deceiving you. For hiding behind a mask that quickened your imagination until you thought I was a Russian princess—or some one else grand and beautiful, instead of just Molly! I know how you feel, Jeff. You

feel you've been cheated. I wish I hadn't done it. It was fun, for the minute, but it hurts now."

"I don't think you have anything to be ashamed of. You beat those aristocratic ladies at their own game."

"Just the same, you are disappointed. It's quite wonderful to have Cinderella turn out a princess, but it's only aggravating to have the princess turn out Cinderella." It was only a little way back to the ship, and already they were mounting the plank. He halted at last at the door of her stateroom, and paused and looked into her brimming eyes. "Thank you for letting me escort you home," he told her gravely.

"I appreciate your asking." Her hand rested an instant in his.

"Molly, I'm kind of a fool, I guess. I don't know just how, but maybe I will, in time. I didn't tell you good-by when I left for the dance, and I'm sorry now—sorrrier than you are about fooling me. It will take many courteous deeds to make up for that discourtesy—and considering that you will soon be leaving for Sitka, I'm afraid I'll never have a chance to pay them."

"I wouldn't want your farewell—unless there was something besides courtesy behind it. But I am not leaving Sitka very soon, Jeff."

He did not know that his face brightened; but she knew it, and the fact made up for many things.

"You don't mean it!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Uncle Dave has to have a lot of repair work done on the ship, he says. He will be here an indefinite time. You can continue to live on the boat, if you like."

"That's just splendid." He stood beaming. "It would have been a pity for our friendship to end so soon. And don't worry about that mess with Baron Karl. He has no real reason for wanting to put me out of the way, and he won't take the chance of a duel—even though he is an old hand at it—until he has a reason."

She agreed with him in this. Everything had turned out all right. She had never seen a night of such perfect beauty. It seemed to her she could still smell the flowers of the garden; and the dance music floated across the water in fairy filaments of melody. Jeff felt rather contented too, quite pleased with his future.

“You’ve forgiven me for deceiving you?” she asked. Of course it was a perfectly foolish thing to ask, but who wants to be always wise?

“Of course, Molly. Any way, you didn’t do anything. We were all supposed to be masked, and it was my own fault if I didn’t know you. You evaded the point whether we had met before. You only told me one real fib.”

“What was that?”

“You shook your head when I asked you if you talked English.”

Her eyes twinkled; and Jeff felt, as men often secretly feel, that the girl knew more than he. “Maybe it wasn’t a complete fib,” she told him mysteriously.

“How is that? You do talk English.”

“No. Put your ear right close and I’ll explain the mystery.”

He obeyed, somewhat pleased to do so, and he felt the touch of her warm lips as she leaned too close. “I don’t talk English, so much,” she whispered.

“What then?”

“I talk—American!”

IX

ALONE in his room, Jeff found perfectly logical explanations for many mysterious things. He conceded that Molly was somewhat superior, in intelligence and charm, to most girls of her class, and thus he had enjoyed the journey with her and had found certain things about her to like and even to admire. To-night, however, he had been the victim of a strangely seductive atmosphere; he had been so taken with the beauty and brilliance of the ball that he had lost certain powers of discrimination, and had simply seen Molly through the colored glass of romance. Probably she did not dance half so divinely as he had thought. Now he put his mind to it, he decided that her costume had been too daring altogether. He wished he had not devoted so much time and interest to her, but had looked more carefully about the dance floor. He might have met some one whom he would be really honored to know.

He went to sleep thinking upon these things, and wakened with the Alaskan sun shining genially through the window of his stateroom. He dressed, breakfasted, and went out for a daylight view of the city.

No wonder Sitkan life was gay! This was the golden age of the town; and the fur trade had made it a real metropolis. There were office buildings, shops, and stores, workshops of all kinds such as laundries, bakeries, joineries, and foundries; there was a sawmill, and at the edge of the town a flour mill run by water power. The seminary would have done credit to a European city; and the cathedral, built as usual in the form of a cross and having three sanctuaries and three altars, brought a vision of the Old World to the benighted Aleut who knelt in its chapel.

He was not surprised to learn that its chime of bells was a gift from the Church at Moscow, that priceless sacred paintings adorned its chapels, and that the silver and gold in the *repoussé* work of the icons and of the vestments and sacred vessels—the accumulation of a century—were worth a king's ransom.

On his walk through the town he visited public gardens and arbors; and he saw with relief that if he ever fell wounded in a duel with Baron Karl, there was a well-equipped hospital where he might be cured. While no other house in the city could compare with the Governor's mansion, the officers of the post had pleasant quarters, and the soldiers were billeted in comfortable

barracks. Block-houses and a stockade protected the town from Indian attack.

To the west of the hill stood the carefully guarded fur warehouse, and through Yanovisk's kindness, a guide was appointed to take him through it. Thereafter it was not hard to explain Sitkan prosperity, or to understand why the eyes of all nations were now turned north. No wonder Seward had dreamed of the northern march of his flag. Alaska was the last, great prize for which the great powers played desperate poker, and now Jeff knew why.

Heaped in glossy piles was the treasure that had brought the Russians across the seas. For this, they had enslaved an entire people, all but annihilated a great tribe, built forts in the wilderness. The Muscovite was never a home-maker. He came to America to plunder, and here was his spoil.

There were bales of beaver, rich brown pelts almost circular in shape, and covered with a shining guard hair that had once been jeweled with water drops. Wherever trees grew and water ran men had gone to procure them; and when the story of Alaska is finally written it must be on parchment made of beaver leather. The picture that came to Jeff's mind was of a lonely, yellow marsh in the midst of the wood, of wide, deep canals dug with unthinkable labor, of tall trees humbled and felled by the patient encroachments of nibbling teeth, of engineering feats which men will always wonder at, and never understand.

There were land otter, glossy brown and rich; full of lights as he moved them in his hands. The inland waters had yielded these: wild, little streams, unnamed, racing forever through lost and hidden valleys; great rivers, wide and blue, on which the trappers' birch-bark craft was but a black spot, hardly seen; roaring cataracts that humbled men to see; serene lakes imaging the shadow of a lone cormorant; still, dark, and mysterious sloughs where the deer drink, in the deep and silent woods.

There were martens—sables the Russians called them—lovely to touch, dusky as shadows in autumn woods. These came from the timbered country, and no Oriental weaver could dream of their beauty. There were fishers, to Jeff merely beautiful furs, but veritable voodooos to the old workman, once a trapper in the interior, who was guiding him through the warehouse. This man remembered many a day when a fisher had beat him along his trap line, robbing bait and leaving worthless scraps of fur in place of his precious trophies.

There were glossy mink, golden-brown, once the terror of bird and rodent; there were ermines, snowwhite and softer to the touch than any silk;

there were muskrats from the bleak, frozen muskegs of the interior; there were spotted lynx whose mournful whine so often wakes the sleeping woodsman in his lonely camp: the fierce hunter with eyes that glow and go out and glow again in the deep gloom about the supper fire.

There were long-haired foxes, popular among the nobles of China and Russia but not well known in America—magnificent silvers, full of imprisoned moonbeams; blue foxes from the bleak, storm-swept Alaskan peninsula far to the west—deep, rich, lustrous blacks. There were red foxes by the thousand, and bale after bale of white foxes, immaculate as the wastes of snow through which they hunted. These came from the most northerly posts of the Company, pursued and trapped in the long, mysterious dusk of the Arctic night.

There was bale after bale of seals, sent from the far Pribilofs far to the westward. Up the rocky shores of those wintry islands came the sea herds, a roaring band whose numbers were almost beyond reckoning. No man knew what summons brought them, or how they had found the way; their great seasonal migration was no less a mystery to the unlettered Aleut who flayed them than to the wisest naturalist who came to study the cycle of their secret lives. On the windy beach they fought, mated, and played, and some of them returned to the sea. These huge bales represented a small part of those which did not return.

When Jeff had seen all these, and all the lesser furs such as wolverine, skunk, and bear, there still remained the fur that had made Alaskan history. In a separate room in the warehouse, under the care of a special guard, Jeff was shown a bale of long, lustrous pelts, like living things in the dusk of the rooms. Jeff had never dreamed of furs like these. When he chose one from the pile and held it up, it shimmered and gleamed with a hundred mysterious lights, and it rippled and twitched in indescribable beauty as he dropped it on the pile. Some of the skins were a deep, rich color, some almost black with silver tips.

“Sea otter,” the guide told him simply. “Any one of ’em is the price of murder.”

He told how in the beginning Russian adventurers had sailed across an unknown sea solely in the pursuit of these magnificent skins, even then worth more than their weight in gold in Chinese markets. Aleut villages had been wiped out for a bale of them; and the great Russian-American Company had been organized principally to deal in them. Still, no sea was too broad to cross if there was the rumor of a sea otter rookery beyond; no

island was too unknown and far for the hunters to seek them; no reef so perilous but that it would be braved by the Aleutian *bidarkas*.

“They’re worth four hundred dollars a skin now, and the market’s going up all the time as the catch of skins decreases,” the old workman told him. “There’s quite a pile of money in that bale!”

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” Jeff agreed. “What a marvelous system behind it all!”

“It’s certainly a wonderful system—for the lords and ladies who own the Company.”

Jeff’s mind was still on the furs; and he did not notice the odd, meaningful tone in which the workman spoke. “I suppose the Company paid tremendous dividends until the Czar began putting on too many restrictions. But they deserved to—no one can belittle what they have done out here. Think of reaping such a harvest of gold out of this empty wilderness, these stormy seas! You must be proud to be a member of such an organization.”

“I ain’t a member of it. I am just a workman.”

“Just the same, you contribute to it. I don’t think many other countries could have done what Russia has done—the building of this gay city out here at the edge of the world; the development of such a profitable organization. I don’t believe even England could do it—at least they couldn’t make so much out of it. America’s attempt would be simply pitiful.”

“No. America couldn’t do it. I know America.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I ain’t a noble, to learn to talk English from a tutor. I spent five years in California—1849-1854. If America should happen to get hold of Alaska, Sitka might almost die out, and it might be a long time before it would come back again. At least, it would be just an Alaskan trading post instead of a European city. There wouldn’t be such a harvest of gold sent back for dividends. Just the same—I wish America owned it!”

“You do!” Jeff stared incredulously, but the old man was certainly in earnest. His dimmed eyes gleamed in his weather-beaten face.

“Oh, don’t I! If America did own it, Alaska wouldn’t be just a fur farm for a bunch of ladies and gentlemen back in Moscow and St. Petersburg. It would be a land of opportunity, not for lords and ladies who dance in fancy-dress costumes to the music of a military band, but for common men like

me. What does the Company care for the country or the people? They've built this city not for colonization purposes, but just as a post to handle the furs that the driven people bring in. They haven't tried to build an Alaskan city; they've made it just as near like a Russian city as they could, to pass the time pleasantly in, until they can enrich themselves, and then go back to Russia."

"There is such a thing as loyalty, sir!" Jeff told him gravely.

"I am loyal to the Czar—God bless him—as long as I'm a Russian. It isn't him that causes the trouble; it's the rule of the nobles. I give this Company my best work; but if you think I have anything like the opportunities, the decent treatment, or the chance for advancement that I'd have if this was an American company, you're badly mistaken. It was organized to take gold out of Alaska, and that's what it is doing. Why shouldn't it pay tremendous dividends? Any system based on slave labor is going to pay dividends. Why shouldn't they build a nice cathedral when they know that the devotion of the natives to the priests of the Greek church is one of the main holds they have on 'em. They've got other systems too, now that the Czar has frowned on forced labor. Look at us white workers—we're kept constantly in debt to the Company, and have as much chance of getting out as if we was in jail. We're under the strictest kind of a military discipline. Not long ago Chief Big Eagle, a native who can mutter a little English and talk Russian pretty good—an intelligent fellow as these natives go—tried to get word out to the Czar about some evils that had been done to his tribe. The Czar is a good Czar, God bless him—liberal and fair to the people more than any Czar that has ever sat on the Russian throne—and Big Eagle thought he would take the native's side against the Company, as he might have done if the message had ever got through. It was intercepted—and now you wait and see what happens to Big Eagle."

"I suppose he'll be given some sort of punishment for not sending his appeal through the proper channels. We have the same thing in our army."

"It's the military idea, all right. He'd had a fine chance for getting it through the regular channels. Yes, he will have some sort of punishment, as you say. I'd like to warn him, if I dared—tell him his message was intercepted so he could clear out—but I know what would happen to me if I got caught doing it. Mark my words—one of these days Big Eagle will show up missing. His family will be informed that his bidarka was wrecked while he was hunting sea otter for the Company. They'll never see him again, and they'll wonder, but they won't dare ask questions. Maybe they'll be told that he got lost in the woods, maybe that he was torn to pieces by a bear.

Anyway, Big Eagle will be gone—likely assassinated, perhaps quietly shipped off—West!”

“Do you mean—Siberia!” Jeff’s voice showed incredulity. He had heard of the Siberian prisons, but he thoroughly disbelieved the stories told of them.

“Sure. He’ll be given a number, and that’s the last anybody will ever hear of him. The prison officials themselves won’t know his name. No one will ever inquire for him, and if they did he couldn’t be found. That’s part of the system—a mighty successful system, too—one that these fellows who go in for systems ought to admire. He’ll work over there, and after a while he’ll die when he’s worked out, and that will be the end of the story.”

“Do you mean—that sort of thing happens frequently?”

“It happens often enough to keep the system running. I shouldn’t be telling you these things. You could make me a lot of trouble if you wanted to—trouble such as you’d never dreamed of. I wouldn’t dare tell you, except —”

“Except why?”

Jeff was considerably stirred by now, and his face showed it. His black eyes seemed to shoot sparks, and rich color glowed high in his cheeks. He felt that the man’s answer would have deep meaning for him.

“Except that you are an American.”

The little disks of color deepened and spread in Jeff’s cheeks. “And does that make a great deal of difference to you?”

“I want to tell you it does.” The old man’s voice wavered as he tried to hide his fervor. “I know what Americans stand for—equality of opportunity, and a square deal for the common man!”

Jeff had no opportunity to think up a suitable answer. At this point in the talk Yanovisk came up, bearing an invitation for lunch at the Executive Mansion. As the two young men walked away together, the Count conversed in a courtly manner; but Jeff failed to observe the fine points of his manner and in fact had difficulty in giving him strict attention. It seemed that he had so many other things on his mind.

X

THE GOVERNOR'S luncheon proved to be in keeping with the dignity of his office. In the long, beautiful dining room of the Castle a table for six had been prepared; and six silent, oriental-looking natives, dressed like house servants of old Russia, were in attendance. They had been trained by exacting masters and according to certain methods in which the noble Muscovite thoroughly believed, and though Jeff had been waited upon all his life by the superior lackies that once graced the Old South, he had never seen such unobtrusive, flawless service as this tendered to him now. The table and buffet had been wrought by cabinet-makers in an age when men put their souls into the work of their hands, fashioned with a skill that now had died from the face of the earth. This young Rebel was no backwoods boor, and he had known a great deal of what was beautiful and fine, but he opened his eyes at these things, and at the crystal and plate that gleamed on their polished surfaces. The Governor had seen fit to honor him with his best.

In addition to this treasure there was food such as only a master Russian chef could prepare, served in portions as was the memorial custom: caviar and other sea food, crisp vegetables from the Governor's gardens, a brown roast of that incomparable wild meat, mountain sheep. There was coffee black as nightshade; and after dessert, when all plate was removed except certain goblets of crystal, there was liquid treasure of such quality and in such abundance as only the Muscovite could appreciate and understand. In the way of mental food there was bright and witty conversation, largely in English, in compliment to the American guest of honor; and there was certainly a brilliance and Old World charm about the whole affair—something above and beyond the food and service, even above and beyond the coffee and other liquids, which was evidently in the air—that went a long way toward taking Jeff's mind off his troubles.

There were three guests besides himself and Yanovisk: Templeton the Englishman, young Lord Staritsa, and—to Jeff's immediate embarrassment—a tall, distinguished-looking Russian with the scar of a bullet wound in his cheek. Templeton was the same courteous, self-confident gentleman that had complimented Jeff's uniform the preceding evening. The adventurer Staritsa, the general effect of whom had been so unpleasant the night before and

whose address had stopped just short of actual insult, wore his company manners to-day; and Jeff thought he had never met a more engaging young nobleman. His wit was keen, his manner cordial, his whole demeanor flattering in the extreme. And what might have proved a most awkward situation became, through Karl's seeming magnanimity and good breeding, an exceedingly pleasant and convivial occasion. The Power behind the monopoly acted as if he had completely forgotten the unfortunate incident of the preceding night.

Indeed, the entire company put itself out to be nice to the "special correspondent" from America. He returned them the most cordial appreciation. His spirits rose to an unprecedented height; and certain troubling little doubts that had lately clouded his happiness faded and disappeared. He was never so certain of the truth of his guiding philosophy. He was confident he had misjudged Staritsa, and Baron Karl too. He convinced himself that the old workman had given him an entirely wrong picture of the Russian system. His talk became more gay and fluent, his heart—the kindly, friendly, true-blue heart that blessed so many Southern people—warmed to the occasion.

These were his kind of people, he told himself. It was with such as these that he wanted to cast his fortune and live his life. Their ideals were the only ideals worth fighting for; their code the right code. He would go over to their side. He would not fight against them; rather, he would tell them, in a few days more, his real mission in Alaska—and thus perform a duty he owed to the South and to Southern friends.

The Governor was an imposing figure as he rose to offer the first toast of obligation. Jeff eyed him with youthful enthusiasm. Though the man spoke no English, the young Southerner understood the meaning of the toast before Templeton echoed it in his own tongue.

"To the Czar!"

Jeff thrilled as every man present stood up, raised his glass and drank. This was what made life worth living.

In the silence that followed Baron Karl's pleasant voice rolled into the room. "This glass must be drunk in honor of our distinguished guest—from America. Is it not so, my friends? Shall it be—to the President of the United States?"

"Perhaps that toast, though likely drunk with avidity, wouldn't please our guest as well as some other," Templeton remarked easily. "Perhaps you didn't notice the uniform that Mr. Sharp wore last night, Karl. It is true that

he wore it for a masquerade, yet it permits us to guess some of our friend's past history. How would you like it, Mr. Sharp, if we make this next toast not to the President—but to Dixie?"

Jeff raised his head, and every man at the table—including the distinguished Russian Governor who spoke no English—knew that this shot had gone home. His eyes flashed and his bold nostrils expanded as he sprang to his feet. He towered above every man in the room except Karl himself as he made his proud answer.

"That is *my* first toast of obligation, Baron Karl! To the South, and the things that the South stood for!"

After the clamor had died down Templeton leaned thoughtfully over the table. "Baron Karl is of a nation who officially took the side of the North during the war, Sharp," said he, "and he, of course, does not understand the situation the way we English do; but you can be sure that personally he wanted the South to win. Almost every man of the noble class in the whole world felt the same, and none of us can quite forgive Alexander II for taking the opposite side. I think the fact will go down in history against him."

"How about Victoria?" Yanovisk asked, with a slight suggestion of heat. "Her personal attitude showed that she didn't want the Union broken up. Of course her officials and the ruling class were strongly pro-Southern, and to say that England was neutral during the war is to joke. Your queen, on the other hand, was at least neutral if indeed she was not pro-Union."

"Monarchs have strange ideas, these days," Karl observed. "They are more liberal than the peasants."

"You said one thing, in your toast, that I don't fully understand," Templeton went on seriously. "You said 'the things the South stood for,' instead of 'the things the South stands for.' Am I to believe there is any change in Southern sentiment since the war?"

"Mr. Templeton, I am sorry to say there is some slight evidence of it. Occasionally you hear a man say—the older men who should know better—that perhaps slavery was wrong; and in the long run it will be better that we are still in the Union. There are some who are willing to forgive and forget, looking upon the great war as something that might have been avoided if there had not been hot-heads on both sides. There are some of us, sir, who do not subscribe to those sentiments. We are proud to say that we can never, never be a loyal part of the Union again."

“None of us blame you, you can be sure of that,” Baron Karl told him. “We are all with you. Every one in Europe who stands for the old regime instead of this new mob rule is firm on the side of you unconquered ones.”

The company now drank the health of England’s queen, and as this third glass began to warm him, to gladden his heart and to dull, slightly but imperceptibly, certain delicate processes in his brain, a bold and reckless idea came to this young Southerner at the Governor’s right. It suddenly occurred to him that here, at this select little gathering, was the fitting place to confess his real mission in Alaska. Here was his chance, without waiting longer, to thwart the enemies of the South.

He was perfectly aware that his disclosures would create a profound sensation. There would be no more laughter and care-free toasts at the long table for this present hour at least; not one of them here dreamed that negotiations between the President and the Czar were already practically concluded; that Alaska was about to slip out of the monopoly’s grasp. There would be no further delay in the conclusion of the treaty between the Russian-American and the Hudson’s Bay companies, no further haggling over terms. The result of his news would be that the two great corporations would immediately reach an agreement, the former would accept the Czar’s offer as to the renewal of its charter, and Seward’s dream would not come true. Any hope of Alaska becoming United States territory would be definitely given over. As Seward had explained, England, the friend of the South, would fall naturally into possession.

He had not planned to show his cards at least for a few days more, taking time to scrutinize every detail of the situation; but that need of caution was past. Why should he not act at once!

The idea brought a sparkle to his eye apart from that induced by heady liquor; and he was quite pale from suppressed excitement. Had his great moment arrived? Surely, there was nothing to gain by delay, and perhaps everything to lose. The circumstances were not in the least open to question. He had looked at the matter from all sides; and there was but one answer. The chance had come to deal a stinging blow to the Union that had crushed his beloved South; to repay England for her friendship to the Southern cause—and only a coward would hesitate to act.

He was not obliged to nurse his hatred by remembrance of Southern wrongs; ruin and ravishment and death. He felt no need of lashing himself into a fervor in which he could blind himself to everything except revenge. He was certain, now, where he stood. All doubts as to his proper course were

past. Here, at this table, were men who stood for what he stood for, representatives of nations and governments who were friends of the South, and to them he owed his loyalty. And now his hands clenched, and his face flamed as his old zeal swept back to him.

No one could look at him and doubt his sincerity. However mistaken this young Rebel might be, however biased and false his reasoning and his standards, at this moment he was true to himself. He thought the way he had chosen was the way of honor and manhood, of loyalty to his cause.

It was as if Fate had provided the occasion. Fate was on his side; it was as if the luncheon had been arranged expressly for his convenience. Here was Baron Karl, one of the chief owners of the Company and consequently most deeply concerned in what was forthcoming. Here was Prince Maksoutof, the Governor, Count Yanovisk his aid, and Staritsa, a noble representative of the patrician class. The presence of Templeton was a coincidence that definitely showed the hand of destiny in the affair; Jeff did not doubt that he was an unofficial agent of England or great English interests sent here to help engineer the proposed treaty with the monopoly—in the largest sense of the term, an international spy. Surely the moment had come to go over to his side. The Rebel would renounce the Union for good and all.

“I have something to tell you,” he began; then, leaning forward in his chair, he waited for a lull in the conversation so that he might be heard by every one. He was now not interested in their talk. So intent was he upon his purposes that he heard them but dimly; nor did he even discern the subject of their conversation. His preoccupation was so deep that it resembled the verge of sleep.

Presently his interest began to quicken. The fact now came home to him that while he was deep in reflection the party had gone forward a pace. The spirit of the affair had undergone a significant change. There was a more familiar note in the conversation that passed back and forth; speech was less guarded; the gentlemen spoke with an added fervor. Jeff noticed that in his mental absence his glass had been filled with an unfamiliar liquid—a cloudy white drink that burned his lips like fire—but the glasses of his friends were empty. Plainly they were one drink ahead of him.

This last libation evidently had been one of considerable potency, because the spirit of the gathering was now one of recklessness rather than of well-bred restraint. On the contrary, the effect of his own three drinks seemed to be wearing off, due perhaps to his mental activity of the moment

before. The warmth and pleasant cordiality that had blessed him had largely passed away; and he found himself clear-headed and keen, able to give their remarks the most careful and accurate consideration.

“Yes, we lost our great chance,” Templeton was saying. “We should have got into the war at the outset. It was a smashing blow to us all.”

Of course he referred to the Civil War, still the evident subject of conversation; and Templeton’s sentiment was one with which Jeff could surely find no fault. Yet he found himself suddenly vaguely suspicious and anxious to hear more. He sensed that there was something besides love of the South and sorrow for the lost Southern cause in Templeton’s sincere regrets as to the outcome of the war.

“But how could you get into it, with your queen neutral or pro-North, and your common people all hoping to see the Union stand?” Yanovisk asked.

“Oh, our queen is a fool—sometimes. Like your own Czar, championing the people against us. You know it’s the truth. They are so secure in themselves, these monarchs, that they have turned liberal, seeing the peasant point of view before they see ours. Our common people would naturally be in favor of the North, simply because they are enamored with the idea of popular government. That ought to show you our danger, Yanovisk. You ask me how we could have managed to get in on the Southern side. It would have been easy enough if we had all put our shoulders to the wheel—the noble class in your country and mine. Propaganda will do wonders. We almost succeeded in England; you failed miserably and offset all the work we did.”

“The trouble with us was that some of our crowd could not see how we were concerned,” Baron Karl observed. “As you say, Templeton, it was a most good, a most fortunate chance to smash—what you say?—sky-high the whole republican idea; but my friends did not have intelligence to seize it. Naturally the idea of helping the South was nothing to them any more than to you, Templeton, or to me—what did we care about their state rights, and their self rule, and all the rest of it.”

Jeff, listening keenly, started ever so slightly; but raising his glass, he gave no further sign that he was attentive.

“But you see that was the argument we had to go on,” Templeton argued. “We couldn’t tell the people that we wanted them to go to war so we could keep them under our thumbs later. We had to make them feel that we really cared what happened to a few sentimental provinces south of the Mason and

Dixon line. My friends, the internal squabble of the Republic was the monarchies' opportunity. If we had done what we should—I mean by 'we' the noble class in your country and mine, and in France—this liberty-equality idea of which we hear so much would have had a setback it couldn't recover from in a thousand years, simply because the republic idea would have proved a failure. By this time, there would be two or three other civil wars, the Southwest possibly breaking off from the Southeast, and the Northwest seceding from New England. The movement toward liberty and democracy would have been definitely checked. Our people would see that countries can't get along without a king—and without a noble class. This new power of America would be broken to fragments. And then—what a chance for international spoil!"

"For the safety of the English people, her Majesty would be obliged to 'establish a protectorate' over the States adjoining the Canadian line," Yanovisk suggested with a grin.

"England would have to hurry to get ahead of Russia," Templeton laughed. "The Czar's advisors would persuade him that the safety of his kingdom demanded the expansion of his American possessions. Washington territory, perhaps; maybe the entire American Northwest."

"The wabbling French king of Mexico would be glad to establish himself firmly by an increase of Mexican territory," young Staritsa remarked. "Of course he would take California, all the Southwest territories, and Texas. The French Crown would receive added prestige, and my yearly visits to Paris would not be haunted with the fear of another revolution."

"Yes, our friends in France would never need fear the return of the Republic," Baron Karl remarked. "But gentlemen, in our partition of America, we have forgotten its very garden." Then, speaking rapidly in French, "What lucky nation would take over the South itself?"

The noble Russian could not dream that the man at the Governor's right, evidently half-drunk and toying with his glass of vodka, had the least gleam of his meaning. French was the tongue of courts, Greek to the rail-splitting Indian fighters of America. The loud laugh that greeted his question was in compliment to his cleverness; it was quite diverting to discuss the dismemberment of a country in the presence of one of its patriots.

But the Southerner had not failed to understand. His knowledge of French had declined greatly since his school days, but now his mind was so active, and for all his seeming indifference so intent upon this amazing conversation, that he not only understood the Russian's remark, but

interpreted correctly all the talk that followed. He was never more sober in his life. The effect of the three drinks had miraculously passed away. His memory was sharpened and alert, and he recognized French words that he thought he had forgotten long ago.

“Yes, who will take over the South!” Staritsa echoed, laughing immoderately. “Of course if we fought on the Southern side we would be entitled to look out for its welfare. I met a lovely lady once, on shipboard, from Virginia. I would insist that Russia take Virginia. You could have all the rest.”

“The Southern gentlemen would be allowed to gather cotton beside their own former slaves,” was Karl’s next sally.

“None of you should have any of it,” Templeton informed the party. “You know what country depends on cotton—England would have to keep the South for herself!” His laugh ended with an oath. “But we are talking moonshine, and you know it. The Civil War is over. The Union is stronger than it ever was—at least it will be when the war-hatred begins to pass away. We lost our chance. It won’t be long till we have a people’s government in our own countries—for that matter, the House of Lords is losing prestige every year. A man can poach rabbits on my place in Devonshire, and can I hang him to the first oak? I can not; I do well to get him a year’s sentence in jail. The old days of privilege are gone—I am afraid not to return. We won’t be able to hold the people down like we used to. We’d better leave this, and remember our guest.”

All laughter had died away when Templeton ceased speaking. The stately dining room was now oddly quiet. Smiling brilliantly, Staritsa turned to the guest of honor.

“I’m afraid we interrupted you, a few minutes ago,” he said in English. “We got to talking about the greatness of your country; and I fear we were rude, yes? You said you had something to tell us—”

Jeff looked him in the eyes. “It was nothing of importance,” said he. “It was not worth the attention of the company.”

XI

JEFF rightly felt that his first work in connection with the commission given him was a close scrutiny of Alaskan conditions. He did not care to work in the dark. He felt that a full understanding of the international and local situation was a debt he owed not only to Seward but also to himself; he believed himself, in a sense, a free agent who must act in the end according to his own conscience and wisdom. The first day in Sitka had been enlightening; but he was as yet far from a decision as to his ultimate course.

In the week that followed he spared no pains to dig out the truth. He talked to otter hunters and trappers, to tradesmen and clerks, to members of the clergy and to soldiers of the garrison. He conferred with the officials of the Company; he investigated all rumors dealing with the proposed Russian-British treaty; he tried to learn the people's real sentiment toward America.

It appeared that some rumor had already got about that the United States was interested in Alaska; but the officials of the monopoly as well as of Hudson's Bay Company seemed to regard it lightly. They were taking their time over the new treaty; and were probably still haggling over details. The sentiment seemed to be that Russia would make no move to find a purchaser for Alaska at least for some years.

As he was quietly making his investigations, Jeff did not fail to allay suspicions as to his real mission by pretending a great interest in the now abandoned transpacific cable, as well as in certain minor disputes that had come up regarding fishing and trading rights between the people of Washington territory and the Russians. Nor did he hesitate to take part in the gay Sitkan social life.

He found that the days passed quickly and rather pleasantly. He met various of the Russian ladies and was frequently entertained by them; he attended every function of importance at the Governor's house; and he even had certain pleasant times with Molly. As he still made his quarters on the ship, he saw a great deal of the American girl, and although she was not included in the social life of the post, she was a pleasant companion in his idle hours. They had many a fine walk together along the beach and back into the forest, and she was his companion at the first Indian potlatch he ever attended—given at the shack of a successful Aleut sea otter hunter.

It came about that after the affair was over, the moon beguiled them into a midnight walk along the Kolosh Ryeka trail, across the quaint bridge and up a path leading toward Mt. Verstovia. Almost at once the forest closed around them; and they were hushed and awed by the presence of the giants. There was a magic in the moonlit Northern woods that even the wild creatures seemed to feel; a mystery that mere reason could not reach, a brooding loneliness, the sense of an eternal and secret wisdom. Though they were not unaware of each other, both the man and the girl were busy with dreams.

Because they had entered into the mood of the forest they had no wish to disturb its all-pervading silence, and so they crept softly along the dim trail, their only communion that of their thoughts and spirits. Except for this fact they might have completed their walk and turned back to the ship without the least adventure of any kind. As it was, they came unseen and unheard, and a minor drama that was in progress on the hillside moved on unaware of their nearing presence.

Although Jeff was dreaming his eyes were wide open. Perhaps he knew the old forest maxim that he who will seek will behold wonders surpassing belief; perhaps there was also a warning of impending events in the still, breathless air. He suddenly paused in the trail, and Molly, walking behind him, pressed against his shoulder.

Instantly she saw what had halted him: a momentary silhouette of a man's form at the brow of a low hill, just above the forks in the trail. Almost at once it faded in the shadows; and although they waited, it did not at once reappear.

This was not just a late traveler from the mountain. His furtive movements indicated that he was lying in ambush beside the trail. Jeff touched Molly's arm, and together they drew farther into the shadows—waiting for what might transpire.

The girl did not question him with one word. This fact shot home to him with considerable force, intent though he was on the business in hand. She quietly took her place at his side; and altogether seemed to be a full partner in the adventure. All at once he made the surprising discovery that she was somewhat of an asset rather than a liability. He was not obliged to spend part of his energy quieting her or combating her fear; so he knew the considerable relief of putting her entirely out of his mind. He felt free and strangely capable of handling any sort of an emergency.

For some little time nothing whatever happened. The girl breathed softly beside him, and he felt the pleasing touch of her warm shoulder. The longer he waited, the stronger was his sense that they were twain. Whatever the crisis, Molly at least could be counted on to stay out of the way.

“It’s a false alarm, I think,” he whispered. “Did we imagine that figure?”

But it might not be, after all, a false alarm. Presently he heard the distant pat-pat of moccasined feet on the path, and peering intently between the trees, they saw the long shadows of a man moving in jerking motions along one of the side trails toward the forks. What part he had in the hillside drama as yet they did not know; he was making no attempt to walk silently or in any way to conceal his advance. If there were indeed an ambush at the forks of the trail, this man was walking straight into it.

Before Jeff could fully realize this possibility and make any move to warn him, the man had reached a small opening between the trees where a moment before the skulking figure had disappeared. He was in plain sight in the moonlight as he started to walk through. At this instant, the affair lost its commonplace character.

There was a sudden confusion of swiftly moving figures in the small clearing. The foe had not been content with decent odds; not one, but three, sprang from the thickets and fell upon the lone pedestrian.

The rest that Jeff saw, he saw as he ran. He saw that the three men evidently lacked faith in their naked hands to master a lone foe and were chivalrously armed with clubs; and he saw further that the pedestrian, instead of instantly yielding to overwhelming numbers, was putting up the gamest kind of a fight, meanwhile looking for a chance to take to his heels. Jeff saw these things as he ran, and he was not obliged to look back over his shoulder. He was running with the idea of getting into the affair in the shortest possible time.

He felt quite sure that it was none of his concern. He was unarmed except for his cane, he had a lady in his charge, and sooner or later he would meet an unhappy end simply by this sort of interference in other people’s affairs. Nevertheless, it was not in him to stand aside when one fought three. Love of fair play is deeply ingrained in Southern youth—part of the heritage of chivalry that has come straight down to the sons of the Cavaliers—and his legs would have wilted under him had he tried to run away. He was like a war horse who smelled battle from afar, breaking any rein of caution that tried to hold him.

He sprinted up the trail fast as he could go, hoping in his heart that the excitement would not be over before he reached the scene. He forgot his fine clothes, any stateliness that he might have fancied he possessed, and he went eight feet at a jump. His eyes flashed and he brandished his club about his head like a battle-ax.

But there was serious business enough when he charged up into the small clearing. The three men had launched a most brutal and deadly attack; and death might come at the end of it. He was presently aware, now that he came near enough to see plainly, that if his old war gods were not with him still, this adventure on the hillside might easily put an end to him. There was valiant fighting before him if he were to come through.

He realized now that the fight had significance beyond what he had first thought. It was not a mere attack by footpads. The aggressors were evidently desperate, or they would certainly make some effort to flee as he sped among them. Their victim was now shown to be an Indian doubtless on the way home from the native potlatch; certainly not acceptable prey to roadside bandits. The three men were evidently soldiers, as they wore the uniform of the garrison.

Jeff did not for a moment suppose he was interfering in an official arrest. Honorable law enforcement is not carried out on wayside trails in the midnight hours. And there was no time to deliberate further. The nearest of the three men lunged at him as he ran past to give aid to the Indian, and in an instant they were grappling like wrestlers.

The conflict was a desperate one, from the first instant. Jeff's man was a powerful Russian of about his own age; and the grasp of his strong hand precluded any attempt on the Southerner's part to use his cane. With his left hand, a fighting tool that seemed of forged steel rather than mortal human flesh, he reached and seized Jeff's throat.

The latter had cause to remember certain hand-to-hand combats at Five Forks; and an honored foe who had passed whooping into Valhalla from his arms. The sport and the adventure of this present fight on the Kolosh Ryeka trail speedily passed away and left it a grim and terrible business neither pleasant to see nor sweet to know. With the closing of those iron fingers on his windpipe the brawl became literally one of life and death. Jeff forgot how he came there, how it all had happened, and what had been the issues involved, and only remembered he must break this hold or perish.

He did not have any large amount of time. Inability to breathe may be tolerated for a few seconds; but thereafter comes a noticeable slump in one's

prowess, accompanied by acute disorders in all the physical and mental processes. Unlike most things, an enemy's hold on one's own throat grows stronger with passing time, simply because of increasing inability to struggle against it. Jeff dropped his cane, and wrenched with both hands at the cruel pinchers which were depriving him of life.

He gave all he had, an amount that was not without honor in the tales that veterans told, and it was just enough. The Russian was forced to let go to save the bones of his wrists and fingers; but the throat skin was flayed off under his raking nails. Jeff's breath came back in a torturing sob, but his strength came with it; and he met the Russian's next attack with considerable power.

Bear-like arms encircled him, and with a terrific wrench his foe hurled him to the ground. He wished to have him where, when an opportunity again presented itself, he could hold Jeff's windpipe undisturbed. In one fight and another throughout his youth Jeff had never met a more satisfactory opponent than this strapping Muscovite, or encountered such ungentle alacrity as this with which he was now laid upon his back. If he lost, at least it would be to some one worthy of his steel.

But he had not lost yet. The fight had just begun. In fact, he had no intention of losing, and he struggled like a demon against his foe's effort to pin him down. The two of them rolled about on the hill, too intent on the business of fighting even to howl, and though their clothes and skins were torn and their faces battered, at first neither could seem to gain the slightest advantage. The Russian sought in vain for another grip on Jeff's throat, and the latter, relying on American methods, could not at first break through the foe's guard to the vulnerable point of his bearded chin.

But now, with the passing moments, a great self-confidence overswept the Rebel. Except for accidents he knew he would surely win. Some toughness that had been put in his frame at birth—perhaps a heritage from frontiersmen ancestors whom he might now, in his little wisdom, be ashamed to claim—had begun to make itself felt, sustaining him through punishment that the Russian could not endure. It was a characteristic American quality; and never did Jeff appreciate it more.

With a strong effort he put his foe beneath him and slowly and patiently began the work necessary to keep him there. His superior stamina was now making itself plainly manifest. The foe struggled desperately and with convulsive strength, but Jeff could not be driven off, nor did his iron hold relax. And now there was but one flaw in his perfect happiness.

As his foe had gone down and Jeff had wheeled up, he had glanced toward the other fighters, and what he saw filled him with concern. It was true that the Indian seemed to be making out fairly well. He was fighting the biggest man of the three—the veritable giant of the lusty trio—but he seemed to be a singularly powerful fellow, and although he was hard pressed Jeff saw in a glance that he was still far from defeat. The thing that now troubled Jeff was not the fate of the savage, but the activities of the third Russian.

Until now he had forgotten about this individual. He had cause to remember an old general's teachings: not to disregard either wing of the enemy that might be temporarily in the background. This was just what Jeff had done; his strategy had ignored a third of the enemy force. Now the intrusion of this factor might easily turn victory into defeat.

Until a moment ago this man had aided his companion in the combat with the Indian. The battle proving too hot for his liking, he had turned now in search of easier prey. In a little half-glimpse between one blow and another Jeff caught sight of him in the act of circling about through the shadows to attack him from the rear.

He could not get up to meet that attack in the teeth. His man kept him too busy for that. He could not even turn his head to watch. And now he knew that very real terror and most hideous anticipation of cold steel being driven into his back.

All these soldiers were armed with knives and were altogether too fond of using them. Blades were particularly useful in hole-and-corner business of this kind because, unlike a rifle, they struck with the softest kind of a sliding sound. Besides, a man who would leave his companion during a fray to seek other conquests is just the kind to whom stabbing comes natural and easy. Unable to break the hold of his first enemy that now clung desperately to his arms, unable to wheel him over as a shield for his own body, there was nothing for Jeff to do but to pray to his gods of chance and wait for what might befall.

One second passed, then another. Nothing whatever happened except that which had already been happening—the interchange of a few pleasantries between himself and the man on whom he lay. The time lengthened almost to a minute; and instead of a renewed attack with reinforcements on the part of the foe there was only a strange and growing silence. The third Russian did not come in sight; neither was any sound to be heard from him. Nothing remained to believe but that he had had no

intention of helping his friend, but that Jeff had seen him in the act of retiring from the company.

Now he had lost his chance. In another instant Jeff would be free to handle him. His first opponent was limp in his arms now, quite unconscious from a short tap which Jeff had dealt him under the curve of his jaw; and although no grave after effects were to be anticipated, he would not be able to resume the fight for some moments at least.

Jeff knocked away his restraining arms and jumped to his feet. He wanted to make sure about the third Russian. And then he uttered a long, tired gasp that was partly wonder and partly a mixture of other emotions too complex to trace.

The man had not gone away, after all. He was lying down. A knife lay near his hand. Jeff had guessed right as to his murderous intentions. The Indian, who had put down his man, walked near and looked him over, discovering at length a slight but evidently effective abrasion on the side of his head. He also would not be himself for some moments to come.

Old generals had taught the young soldier always to keep his eye open for the unexpected, the intruding circumstance that turns the tide of battle. Here it stood, most wonderfully beautiful in the moonlight that streamed down between the trees.

It was Molly; her eyes lustrous with tears, but her capable hand still firmly clasping Jeff's heavy-handled cane.

XII

JEFF was a rather fluent young man ordinarily, with a nice speech usually ready on his lips, but for a few seconds following his discovery of Molly's presence on the battlefield he was as silent as if he were born mute. It was not mere inability to think of something suitable to say. There was simply nothing possible to say which would tell how he felt, or the meaning that this moment had for him. The language is old and rich, but there are times when it seems pitifully inadequate.

However, Jeff did some clear and able thinking. One of the first things he thought was that he would never, even in the secret places of his mind, make light of this girl again. She might not be his kind of a girl, the kind that fulfilled his ideal of womanhood, but every spark of manhood made him stand up and admit that her fine courage and steadfastness—hers alone—had saved him from serious injury or death. She had done him a service that even in this Northern land he would probably never have opportunity to repay, and he would always be her acknowledged debtor. In addition to this, there was born in this memorable night a comradeship between them that ought never to pass away, the inevitable result of their common danger and victory.

Strangely enough, the romance of their relationship seemed lessened rather than increased. His romantic nature had been deeply stirred some nights before when this same capable, companionable girl had danced with him in mask and fancy dress; but it was quite lifeless now. It was hard to explain how a midnight adventure that had brought them close together could, in a sense, estrange them; erect a barrier definitely to shut out a more beautiful relationship. Yet this thing was true. He was moved, deeply grateful; but his emotion was something far different than she might be dreaming. He was not particularly good at self-analysis, so perhaps he could not tell why things were as they were; he only was certain that this courageous woman who had plunged into a fight and with a man's weapon repelled a murderous attack upon him was not and could never be the romantic ideal he had cherished so long. He was a sentimental youth—the child of a strangely sentimental environment—and his heart's image was something far different from this. In his dreams, he was the knight who

saved the helpless and wistful lady, and never was he rescued in a brawl by a young Amazon who knocked men down with clubs!

She simply was not his kind of a girl. Of this fact he was more certain than ever, even in this moment of real and profound gratitude toward her. It might have been easy for a man of logic to show that such a stand was impossible and untenable; but it would not have changed Jeff Sharp. The ideals and sentiments of youth may be foolish and untrue; yet lives are shaped by them just the same.

"I can never thank you," he told her gravely. "It was the finest thing of the kind I ever saw."

Both were white-faced in the moonlight. The girl had a startled look; and perhaps also a bewildered, dazed look as if something had turned out far different from her dreams. Her eyes were still lustrous with tears, and now she tried to force back the stinging drops, as if they told her heart-secrets no one must know. Although she tried hard to make herself look away, she kept looking into Jeff's eyes for what the moon might show her; and why she did not know. Jeff, hating himself, and wholly ill at ease, found relief from the strain of the moment by turning his attentions to the fallen foe.

The Indian had got up by now, after examining the clubbed Russian, and his face as he regarded Molly was comical to see. His stern mouth was rounded, his eyes showed a vast and incredulous admiration.

"Heap big squaw!" he breathed. "Knock'm down—pretty near kill'm. Indian woman, she fight'm—never saw white woman fight'm before. Skookem big, big, strong squaw."

No wonder both Jeff and the girl looked at him with frank gratitude. He had saved the situation which had passed almost beyond them. Their laughter was a safe mask behind which they could hide their hearts.

"I agree with you perfectly," Jeff laughed. He sobered instantly. "Now, Chief, tell us what this means. Had we better try to bind these three men? They will be coming to, in a minute. One of 'em is stirring now."

Coming originally from the Stikine country, the Chief had many times held parleys with the factors of Hudson's Bay and understood a few words of English, but Jeff's remark was all too complex for him to follow. Grunting, he indicated inability to understand.

"Tie 'em up?" the white man simplified. At the same time, he brought his hands about his ankles in a suggestive gesture.

“No, tie ’em up. Skin out quick. Company catch me, catch you, catch big strong woman.”

Jeff experienced a queer, dim quickening in his memory. There was something oddly familiar about all this. He stared into the native’s face.

“What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Name?—Him Big Eagle.”

Big Eagle! Jeff remembered, now, his first morning in Sitka and a conversation he had had with a grizzled workman in the fur warehouse. Jeff had not believed the man’s story then; but he could not very well doubt it now. The argument on the hillside had been all too convincing. The man had said that something of a disagreeable nature would happen to Big Eagle; and so it had: he had been neatly waylaid as he walked home from the potlatch, and just what was to have been done to him was at present locked in the minds of the three Russians who slept peacefully among the spruce needles. Perhaps he was to have been killed and his body put away, thus making it certain he would make no more appeals to the Czar; and perhaps the idea had been to take him alive, put him on a westward-bound ship and hear no more of him. In either case Big Eagle would be satisfactorily silenced. Probably the soldiers’ instructions had been to do the latter if possible, and if not, the former; certainly it did not make a great deal of difference either way.

It was an efficient system that Baron Karl operated in the provinces of the Czar.

Jeff was for a moment absorbed in his thoughts; but he emerged swiftly when he heard Molly in conversation with the native. The girl was speaking a language that the Rebel did not know, a queer, guttural tongue, full of harsh consonants. He had the cultural advantages that usually make a linguist, yet obviously she had considerable knowledge of languages other than her own. This was the second time she had surprised him in this way. He had not forgotten her fluent French, heard the night of the Governor’s ball. There was but one reasonable explanation: she was probably quick at language—as she was at everything else—and traveling about the world with her uncle she had picked up an understandable smattering of many tongues directly from the people who used them.

It was perfectly evident that Big Eagle understood her every word. He was looking into the girl’s face with every sign of intense interest and nodding vigorously as he answered her questions. His admiration of her was more obvious than ever; and Jeff was reminded of a dog with his master.

Presently she turned to Jeff. "Big Eagle tells me it was a conspiracy against him on the part of some men in the Company," she explained. "He is going to vanish at once in the interior—up to his old hunting grounds on the Upper Stikine—because he says it is his one chance for life. He says that you and I had better get back to the ship as soon as possible."

"I suppose it means trouble for us, too. These men are certain to recognize us."

"But they are not certain to tell!" Molly informed him. "It isn't human nature for three men, selected on account of their strength and prowess, to enjoy confessing a defeat at the hands of two men and a girl, particularly when they had all the advantage of ambush. They'll make up some sort of a story about how Big Eagle's Indian friends came to his rescue—and although they knocked out a score or so, in the end had to retire before superior numbers. Jeff, I don't think we'd better wait any longer. Good luck, Big Eagle!"

"Heap seals, great white mother!" the native returned. And as they looked at him, he seemed to vanish into the empty air. The forest he had known and loved so long instantly hid all sight and sound of him, and where he stood was only moonlight and the long shadows of the trees.

XIII

MOLLY had a perfectly simple explanation for her ability to talk to the native. "Traveling around with Uncle Dave I've picked up a smattering of several tongues," she told him, when they were safely aboard the ship. "I have been in the woods, too—up the Stikine in a bidarka—and I've learned to talk a jargon that most of the tribes understand. It has often been useful to me."

After talking the matter over with Captain Skinner, they decided to make no report of the fight on the hill, but quietly await developments. When a few days passed without anything untoward it seemed likely that they would never hear from it again. The cordial manner of Semanof, in command of the garrison, remained unchanged; and Jeff decided he was either playing a deep game or, what was far more likely, that the three dragoons had failed to make a true report to their commander. Perhaps, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the men were simply three desperadoes who had lain in ambush beside the trail for the purpose of robbing passers-by, and Big Eagle happened to fall among them.

Jeff told himself he had heard of even more unusual coincidences. He must have further evidence before he would believe all the old workman had told him. To this youth who so fervently believed in the superiority of monarchies over republics, in a government by a privileged noble class over that of the plain people, some of the things he had heard and seen were painful to accept.

Jeff would have deeply resented a charge of bigotry. He knew himself to be a man of strong convictions, but one of the strongest of them was his belief in his own tolerance and fairness. He thought he was always open to argument, besides being a fair judge of evidence. Yet so fervent was he in his own philosophy that he was largely able to believe exactly what he wanted to believe, and nothing else; and his memory had a gratifying way of holding what was pleasant and quickly expelling that which vexed and distressed. The smarting wound his self-satisfaction had received at the Governor's luncheon had mostly healed by now. The conversation he had heard had dimmed in his remembrance. Now, with the passing days, the adventure on the hillside had ever less meaning to him. Its ugly significance was forgotten or questioned; from a really black crime it became an event of

neutral shade which he might have interpreted entirely wrong. Big Eagle was not here now to plead his case. The wilderness had swallowed him, and none of the officials of the Russian Company who used to buy his otter skins knew where he might be found. Jeff would not relive the incident by talking it over with Molly, perhaps because he knew and dreaded her reluctance to mince words, her ability to arraign and to ferret out the truth. Molly, guessing these facts, avoided the subject altogether.

Jeff did not want his philosophy questioned. The more he saw of Sitkan official and court life, the greater its appeal, the more obvious its superiority over anything to be found in his own country. Surely the peasant existence in the Northern States and Middle West could not be compared with it. Since the South was now crushed it also failed to measure up. The gay social life, the refinement and particularly the European charm and culture certainly made up for many things. Strict discipline of the natives was of course an absolute necessity, and perhaps the somewhat harsh treatment of Big Eagle had been justified by serious crime.

He was dined, fêted, flattered, treated like a nobleman himself, none of which offended him in the least. It was true that a remark was made now and then which he could not fully appreciate, and sometimes something that looked like a skeleton stalked out of the imperial closet, only to be quickly confined again; but on the whole these first weeks in Sitka were more to his liking than any term of equal length in his care-free youth. Yet it was not to be that he should continue to see only those things that official Alaska cared to show him. The outside view of the Russian-American system was most pleasant to behold, but Jeff was carried on the inside in spite of himself.

One October evening no social engagements demanded his presence; and after supper he sat alone on the deck of the *Ethan Allen*, wondering at the blackness of this Alaskan night. Clouds had massed in the sky, imprisoning the least faint gleam of a star; and the sea was actually like ink, except where the harbor lights threw a dim and fitful gleam. The town lights were like small, yellow holes in a black sheet. Although the hour was still early, the last gray strand of twilight had vanished apparently into the blackness of the sea; he was tasting the long autumn nights of Sitka, a northern city in spite of its comfortable climate.

He could not see even the wan gleam of wave-crests that are usually visible even on the blackest sea, partly because of the intensity of the gloom, partly because the faint wind that blew in the harbor hardly stirred the waters into foam. Likely the wind was brisk and keen enough, however, out on the deep. Beyond the coast ranges, out from the warm winds that follow

the Japan current, winter itself menaced, its chilling breath already over the land—the white winter of the North that all Northern men fear in their hearts.

As Jeff watched the distant lights, oppressed somewhat by the depth of the gloom about him, he heard a subdued splash close to the water and just beside the curving hulk of the ship. At first he thought it was merely a leaping fish, but as he listened a wooden object scratched the side of the ship. Of course it was a small boat of some sort, but Jeff found it almost incredible that any sort of a boat could approach unheard over that hushed sea, in the dead silence of the night. The fact that it had done so would have been fair proof to an old Sourdough that the man who propelled it did not wear a white skin. Only the red man is adept at paddling a canoe without the paddle splash that a moose can hear.

Jeff stood up and peered over the rail, but it was like looking into an unlighted tunnel. He could not even make out the boat's outline. But at that instant a voice came up out of the deep.

It was a moving and mysterious sound in the utter darkness, and Jeff felt as if he were being addressed from another world. Its subdued note indicated the message was for his ear alone; and the fact that the language used was not English, but rather a guttural tongue that he did not know, added rather than detracted from the mystery.

“Speak English,” Jeff replied. “I can’t understand.”

The man at the water line evidently could not speak English, because he merely repeated the sentence. On this repetition, however, Jeff caught a single word that he thought he knew. As near as he could tell, it was “*Americansk!*”

He was not a fool, and he assumed at once that the man was trying to ask if Jeff were an American—possibly if the ship had American registration. It had not been his practice since the war to use the term “American” in regard to himself; but now, vaguely excited by the mysterious visit, he all but answered in the affirmative, remembering his unfailing pride just in time. “It is an American ship,” he replied, his voice also subdued. Then, trusting that the man would know the Aleut word for boat—a word that Jeff had heard frequently since coming to Sitka and easily remembered, he added: “American—bidarka.”

This information apparently reassured the visitor, for a long silence immediately ensued; and when Jeff heard him again he had paddled silently as a drifting cloud around the bow of the boat and was tying up at the dock.

One of the lights of the quay showed faintly a long, native canoe at the water line, and two lithe, long-haired natives.

They immediately started across the plank on to the ship, and Jeff got up to meet them. He did not attempt further conversation with them, but assuming that their business was with Captain Skinner led them immediately into the latter's quarters.

It was Molly who in the end had to translate the vernacular into English. After the first sentence she turned to Jeff with a look of question.

"I think this will be a matter for you to attend to, Jeff," she said. "He tells me he wants to talk to a representative of the American Government, and is probably after American protection. Since we haven't an accredited consul in Sitka, I guess you'll have to give it to him."

"But I am here as a special correspondent, Molly."

"I know that is your official standing, but everybody seems to think that you are close enough to official Washington to look after American interests up here. Your influence would be certainly greater than the captain's or mine, the only other citizens of the United States. Jeff, I think this will be your affair."

There followed a long conversation between the girl and the native, the former asking questions, the latter muttering long and seemingly unintelligible sentences in his harsh, guttural tongue. Although Jeff and Captain Skinner listened intently, neither caught a familiar word.

It was no easy task to get the complete story. Pumping an Indian is always an aggravating and tedious undertaking; and this strange bastard tongue which the men used, full of native idioms, required the most careful translation. The girl was infinitely patient, and the two white men, bursting with curiosity, not only fumed and complained but made her task harder by foolish questions. She was a long time digging out the truth.

"They seem to have come on a rather delicate mission," she explained at last. Her heightened color, lovely under her yellow hair, and her brilliant eyes showed she had found the story keenly interesting. "They were sent to get some kind of an American official if such could be found, and if not, an influential American whom our government would look after. At first I had quite a time getting them to be frank with me. They wouldn't go on till I made it plain that while you, Jeff, were not an official, at least you are a 'chief' and could do more for him in Washington than any one else in Sitka.

If he couldn't find a 'chief' he wanted the captain of on American vessel. With good luck, they found both."

"You're worse than the Indians, Molly," Jeff complained with some humor. "Can't you get at the story?"

"I will, quick as I can. It seems there is a disabled steam schooner in the harbor behind Barabara Point. Do you know where that is, Uncle?"

"Sure. That's the native name for a place on the mainland, at least twenty hours' run from here. The Aleuts built a big barabara on the point to use in otter hunting. Who is she?"

"She is the *Boston Dame*. She's been trading off the coast of Siberia. She's not badly damaged, but she's stuck up there in the lagoon for at least a moon. She's in command of Captain Cooper, and she wants help."

"What kind of help? A tow?"

"No. I asked about that particularly. She wants an American official to get a ship and come up there and take off part of her cargo to save it. What can the man mean by that."

"I know mighty well what he means, and so do you."

"To keep some one else from getting it?"

"Sure. He's been trading with the natives for furs, and he's probably got some fine ones. Course he calculated to shoot right through to an American port; and he's hung up the last place on earth he would have picked out. He knows what will happen when word reaches the Russian Company that he's gone aground—the same what you know, and I know, too."

"What?" Jeff demanded. His tone showed that he resented, in spite of himself, the Captain's knowing manner.

"They'll come up and seize his cargo, that's what, and maybe his ship, too." He whipped to the girl. "Has Cooper got papers showing permission to trade?"

The question had to be repeated, in laborious detail, to the natives, and their answer returned. "They say he has all his papers and was entirely in his rights," the girl translated at last.

"I don't doubt it; Yankee skippers as a rule don't go to smuggling," Captain Skinner commented with vigor and emphasis. "Just the same, he knows them permits won't save him a minute. Baron Karl's gang won't even

look at his papers, and if he tries to show 'em, they'll tear 'em up and chuck 'em into the harbor."

"You mean they would unlawfully confiscate the cargo of an American trading vessel?" Jeff demanded incredulously.

"They won't confiscate it. That's too big a word. They'll just pinch it. Furs are too hard to catch to let a chance like this go by, and they resent the Czar's liberality in granting trading permits and deny his right to do so. They'll just report that they caught him trading in their waters, and that's all there's going to be to it, and maybe they won't take the trouble to make any report at all—especially if the boat would happen to sink! It'd be something the same if the Hudson's Bay Company boats come along and spied him, because Barabara Point is on the panhandle which they've chartered from the Company, but in this case they'd likely be given the chance of some sort of trial in London."

"How does he think we can help him?" Jeff asked.

"That's plain enough. He knows that the Company here or the Hudson Bay Company is bound to learn about him before he can make repairs and get out. He wants you to come up there in a boat and take care of part or all of his furs for him, and keep 'em for him. In other words, use the power of the United States Government to keep the gang from taking them away from him. They're only too tickled to rob an American; they think he can't fight back. What you going to do about it?"

"But I'm not an official, Skinner."

"Not an official official, anyhow. Just the same, Sharp, you can do it for him if any one can. Everybody up here knows you are close to the administration—and that you're representing Washington in this cable matter, or trading rights, or something. There ain't any other Americans in Sitka, so it's up to you, plain enough."

"I'll help him all I can, of course, if he deserves it. I wasn't given any instructions to take this kind of an affair under my wing, but since I have influence in Washington, it's for me to help him."

"It's for all of us to help him," was the emphatic reply. "Ain't he from our country?"

"I must say, however, that I think you misjudge the Company officials," Jeff went on stiffly. "I don't think they'd confiscate a cargo of furs lawfully taken."

“You don’t, huh?”

“I can’t help but think you exaggerate the danger. These officials are not pirates; they are very superior men. I think the probability is that the man has been trading unlawfully, and now he’s afraid he’ll be caught at it. However, I think we should go up and investigate, and if it’s necessary I’ll take charge of part of his furs and keep them for him till he’s ready to sail.”

“You bet your skin it’s necessary! The only thing I’m worrying about is whether you’ll be able to keep ’em for him after you get ’em.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense, Captain.”

“So? Well, you’ve got a lot to learn. Karl and his boys can be mighty noble, and swell, and all that, when they’ve got nothing to gain by being otherwise. Put a stack of money in front of ’em and you’d see how long they’d stay noble. Just about as long as I would, and no more!”

Jeff laughed in spite of himself. “I don’t know about your New England conscience, Captain,” he rejoined, “but it’s ridiculous for you to infer they’d be crooked with me. Baron Karl is my friend, and so are many of the other Company officials; and I really don’t like to hear you talk that way about them.”

“All right, wait and see. A lot depends on how valuable the furs are. Prince Maksoutof plays a square game as far as I know, but he is only an agent for the owners of the Company, such as Karl, and what you don’t know about that fellow would fill a dictionary. But don’t think I’m trying to persuade you not to help the poor devil out. It’s the least we can do; only see that you’re properly rewarded for exerting your influence with Washington and the officials here, as well as for the risk you’re taking.”

“Pooh! Where do you get the risk?”

“Any time a man has gold in his hands—and furs are gold—he’s in danger. I’m not fooling, Sharp, and I say it could be a serious danger up here. Where you going to get a boat to go help him?”

“I don’t know. Do you?”

“How about this one? We’re an American outfit, and would take pleasure in it.”

“But you’re disabled!”

The Captain looked down his nose, and his expression was so peculiar that Jeff’s interest was immediately aroused. “So we are! Molly, what are we

going to do about that?"

"What can we do, Captain?" the girl replied. "Don't you think you could patch us up somehow, enough for the short run out and back?"

"Oh, maybe so. Molly, show the natives into the galley and see that they get some coffee—with plenty of sugar. I'll go down and talk to the chief engineer. I guess we can make the brig run, and the sooner we get started, the better our chance to save the cargo of the *Boston Dame*."

Before long Jeff was to understand why the fame of the Yankee skippers carried over the five oceans, a tradition that would endure clear until that unhappy time when American youth chose the city rather than the sea, and our strong ships were guided by alien hands. Captain Skinner went below, gave certain orders, and then went to bed, at which time the fires in the boiler room were all but out, parts of the engine were dismantled, and the spirit that lived in the ship—that which bore it over the waves and all sailors believed in—had seemingly passed away, as if in death. When Captain Skinner got up again, in daylight, all that remained to do was to stand upon his bridge and give his orders.

He gave those orders in a voice that could be heard over most of Sitka. The wounded bird took wing. In the chill morning hours—bravely as her famous namesake advancing on Ticonderoga—the *Ethan Allen* steamed out from the dock. Soon she had passed the harbor mouth and once more felt the long roll of the seas under her stout keel.

XIV

IN the dawn that followed, the crew of the *Boston Dame* experienced a moment of acute anxiety when a determined-looking schooner steamed into the harbor behind Barabara Point. Because the time was halfway between night and day, there was not sufficient light to distinguish her nationality. Was she answering their summons for help, or was she a craft belonging to one of the great fur companies and which had happened along at precisely the wrong time.

They did not, however, remain long in doubt. Captain Skinner cast anchor at a convenient distance, then stepped on to his bridge and began to converse with them. If there were any mountain goats on the distant peaks behind the point, they heard Captain Skinner's conversation distinctly. To the great delight of Captain Cooper and his men, he informed them that he was an American, that he commanded an American crew, and the *Ethan Allen* was decidedly an American vessel; and he inferred they would all greatly resent being mistaken for any other nationality.

"Who you got aboard?" the *Boston Dame* skipper called. His voice was fairly loud and strong; but it carried no more than a mile or so out to sea.

"I got Jefferson Sharp aboard, second cousin to General Grant," was the reply. As far as his name was concerned, Jeff had a right to feel he was now introduced to every living thing in that end of Alaska. It was more publicity than he had ever had before. Jeff Sharp was no relation whatever to General Grant, however; and he could not imagine where Skinner got the idea that he was.

"Then put over a boat and you and him come over."

This suggestion was immediately acted upon, and in a few minutes Captain Skinner, Molly, and Jeff were climbing a rope ladder to the *Boston Dame's* deck. They found her a stanch, hard-sailing vessel with spotless decks and none of the signs of disreputability that mark so many traders in northern waters.

Jeff was introduced with a flourish. "He ain't exactly an official in Sitka right now," Skinner confided, "but he's hand in hand with the President, and the telegram that told me to wait pretty near two weeks for him, came straight from the White House. He calls Mr. Seward by his first name; and if

you've got business with official Washington, he's the man to handle it for you."

When on the bridge of his own ship Captain Skinner was the monarch of all he surveyed; but now, after he had made his little speech, he found himself second in command. So quietly and calmly that no one had seen him do it, a black-eyed youth in stylish garb had taken complete charge of the situation. Jefferson Sharp was now the important person present. It lay with him what help could be given Captain Cooper of the *Boston Dame*. He was like a pilot who, hauled aboard at the harbor mouth, lights on the deck with a ringing command at his lips; but to-day it was the cargo, rather than the ship, which must be piloted through dangerous waters.

"Let me see if I get this straight," he addressed Captain Cooper. "You have been lawfully trading over West, and are homeward bound with a cargo of furs. For fear they will be taken from you, you want me to take charge of all or part of them."

"That's the ticket," Cooper replied. "If you don't take 'em off my hands, one of the big companies will. Any hour one of 'em might happen along."

"Regardless of the fact that you have your permits?"

"Why, Mister, they wouldn't even look at my papers. All they could see was what I had on board. I was counting on giving this end of Alaska a wide berth, because I knew they'd want to search me if they saw me. And here I am, held up tight."

"They evidently know you."

"They knew I came up here trading—spotted me on the way out. They know I've got my papers, but—excuse me—if you think them papers is going to keep 'em off you ain't very well informed on the trading business. For my part, I was countin' on a fair wind and a good head of steam."

"I'd like to see your papers, if you please."

Jeff rather expected the man to back down, but instead he went straight to his cabin and promptly appeared with the necessary permits, duly signed, sealed, and witnessed. They were plainly genuine.

"They're all right," Jeff admitted. "I don't see what you need of me. They show absolutely that you are in your rights."

"A lot of good that does me, Mr. Sharp. I want your help—your private aid and your influence officially—and I'm willing to pay for it. Come on

down below. I've got something to show you. You never in your life, I don't think, saw anything like it."

He turned, leading the way down a ladder that led into the forward hatch. The advancing dawn had scarcely reached here yet, but the captain's lantern threw a yellow gleam into a strange, lustrous darkness that was no part of the gloom of the hold. Piled about them, high as a man could reach, was bale after bale of furs.

Captain Skinner had traded in pelts, and he had never dreamed the time would come when he would ask the name of any northern fur that was put in his hands; and at any other time he would have staked his ship that the dark, shimmering, rippling thing caressing his hand was just what it appeared to be, what his senses told him it was. Yet the very quantity and size of the bales cast discredit upon his senses. Sheer numbers floored him; he could not believe in them. He was a hard-headed old Yankee, used to one thing and another, but to-day he feared that his faculties were going back on him.

He shook his head with considerable emphasis. "Not all sea otter!" said he.

"Yes. All sea otter. One of the last big rookeries."

Skinner's eyes began to glitter and dance in the gloom of the room. Molly, who knew something about furs, gasped audibly; Jeff was lost in the very beauty of the living, quivering heaps.

"Oh, Lord, there must be two thousand of 'em!" Skinner went on.

"Not two thousand. The bales aren't as big as they look. But there's a thousand, with just a couple of skins extra. And they're worth both our ships put together."

"And a whole fleet besides. Four hundred dollars was the last quotation for the common run of skins."

"These are extra large and fine. They'll bring that figure net. That's four hundred thousand dollars. Captain Skinner, will I ever get into port with 'em?"

Captain Skinner shook his head so gravely that every one present stopped the wheel of their thoughts to look at him. Real gravity was uncommon in this boisterous Yankee skipper. "Cap'n, I doubt it. 'He travels the farthest who travels light.' Though I could carry all those bales over in a few loads of the dory, they'd sink any ship. Violence and sudden death happen to people with them things on their hands."

“How about the American embassy at Sitka. Can it protect ’em for me?”

“There ain’t any America embassy at Sitka. The only American flag in the town is on this ship at the quay. My friend here is the nearest thing to an official American around there, and his great influence is personal rather than official. Can he protect ’em for you? Well, there are places, places that has got kind of acquainted with the American flag, where it would go a long way toward protecting an American’s property. I don’t know about Sitka. I must say I doubt it. But if any American can keep ’em for you, Sharp here’s the man. They know he’s powerful enough to make ’em a lot of trouble; at least he wouldn’t be as safe to bother as an unknown skipper. He’s close friends with the high men of the Company. Over and above all this, he hails from a State where they don’t believe in giving up without a fight.”

“What do you think, Mr. Sharp?” Captain Cooper asked. “Do you think they’ll try to get ’em away from you?”

“I know they won’t,” was Jeff’s emphatic answer. “The idea is ridiculous. It’s absurd to think they’d bother you here, either, except to ask to see your papers. I know those skins are tempting, but the officials of the Russian-American Company do not yield to that kind of temptation.”

“Maybe so and maybe no. I’ve heard right smart about Baron Karl. Will you take the skins off my hands?”

“If you want me to, yes. It might be that they would be safer from piracy. You will have to turn over your permits to me, in case I was ever questioned.”

“I expected to do that. I only wish I was confident as you are. But I know Baron Karl, and I don’t know you; and it looks to me like my cake was dough.” He paused, sighing. “Now, here’s my proposition. You and Captain Skinner take these skins off my hands, keep ’em for me, don’t let anybody know you got ’em till you have to, and get ’em down to an American port soon as possible.”

“I think we can make a special trip down there with ’em as soon as some repairs can be made on my ship; and we can fill her bunkers,” Skinner told him.

“Good. They’ll be some little trouble and some risk—maybe more’n a little. I am going to make this thing worth your best efforts. If you get these thousand skins down to an American port where I can put ’em in safe hands, you get five hundred of ’em to divide between you.”

Captain Skinner made a queer clucking sound; but above that, only his eyes talked. Those bright, Yankee eyes made unmistakable appeal to Jeff. The latter whirled to face Captain Cooper.

“Did you say—five hundred skins to divide between us, if we bring the batch through?” he asked, steadily as he could.

“Yes. Half of ’em. Isn’t that fair?”

“Man, those five hundred skins are worth two hundred thousand dollars!”

“Don’t I know it? That’s the contract I’ll make with you. Half of ’em left to me is better than none of ’em. None of ’em is what I’d have when Baron Karl’s crowd found me here with ’em.”

“Of course you’ll put the deal down in black on white?” Captain Skinner suggested. He was a captain of the sea, but that did not affect his being a Yankee.

“Sure. You give me receipts for ’em in exchange. Are you ready to take ’em? If so, I’ll have the boys lower the longboat.”

Dreaming what this would mean, Jeff hurried out of the hold and into the captain’s cabin where in a few minutes all arrangements for the transfer were completed. No wonder he was silenced and bewildered by this sudden tide of fortune, exalted by new hope, keyed to a new interest and zest for life. He was only human, and he had tasted that bitter drink, the particularly cankerous sort of poverty that is commonly called genteel; and no wonder his outlook on life was now changed and brightened. It seemed to him that the golden harvest of this fur-bringing was already pouring over him. Never for a moment did he doubt his ability to bring the skins through. He really believed that Cooper’s fear was utter nonsense.

The crew of the *Boston Dame* was at once set to work carrying the bales across in the longboat to be stored in the hold of the *Ethan Allen*—an easy job briefly done. Jeff and his party returned to the latter ship and were soon ready to sail.

“Good luck, and don’t worry!” Jeff called to Captain Cooper, as the gray sea widened between them. “Your skins will be safe.”

“I ain’t worrying,” the latter called back. “I’m either busted or I’m rich. It’s up to you to do the worrying from now on.”

Such seemed to be the case. Bearing down toward the harbor mouth was a large ship, in the haze of distance apparently as stanch and formidable as a

man-of-war. She paid no attention to the disabled vessel in the harbor. Evidently her captain had seen, through his glass, the passing back and forth of the longboat between the two American traders. She was headed straight toward the *Ethan Allen*.

XV

ALMOST at once Captain Skinner recognized the approaching ship as the *Queen*, one of the Hudson's Bay Company's fleet and plainly in her rights. Barabara Point and all of the Alaskan mainland north to Cape Spencer was, by right of the treaty of 1839, the great English company's trading ground. Skinner noticed also that she was a high-speed ship compared to his own safe and steady schooner; and it might be that this observation was a factor in his subsequent conduct. While it was true that from time to time he had been known to run a race, he firmly decided that such conduct would now be extremely discourteous to the British captain. Like an honest man with nothing in particular to do, he steamed out until he was some three miles offshore, and headed into the sea with just enough power to hold his own against the tide, waiting for what might befall.

At length the *Queen* drew up in easy shouting distance, and she too headed into the tide. So far as Jeff could see, Captain Skinner was not even watching her maneuvers. He leaned comfortably on the rail of his bridge, smoking peacefully and making weather predictions for the next day. It was not until the stranger captain began to shout through his megaphone that the old Yankee showed any knowledge of his presence.

"Who are you and where bound?" the *Queen's* master called. His angry tone indicated any one of several things, perhaps that complications had risen in what had seemed to be a very simple, expeditious, and not to mention profitable affair, perhaps merely that Skinner's air of calm and indifference had grated unpleasantly upon him.

"Schooner *Ethan Allen*, American registry, bound for Sitka," was Captain Skinner's reply. He spoke, so he thought, very softly; yet the Englishman seemed to understand clearly. "Who are you?"

"Captain Lennox, of Hudson's Bay *Queen*. You took some of the cargo off the *Boston Dame*, didn't you?"

"Yep. All what was any good."

"We want to see the papers showing that stuff isn't contraband. Heave to, we're coming aboard."

Captain Skinner took his pipe from his mouth. It is a regrettable fact that he spat—seemingly with no shame—smack into the sea. “Who’s coming aboard?” he asked.

He was speaking quite softly now; and there followed a curious rustle and stir among the men of his crew. They began to think that there might be something to this business, after all. When the captain used such a tone of voice it was usually indicative of impending action, often of a disagreeable sort.

“Myself and some of my men,” was the answer. The decisiveness of his tone could not be mistaken. Decisiveness is a British quality that Skinner thoroughly respected; and now he watched like an eagle the activities on the deck of the *Queen*.

Captain Lennox evidently wished to make good time rowing across. No less than twelve oarsmen preceded him into the longboat. Skinner waited very patiently until they had pushed off, and until the morning light glittered on certain instruments leaning in easy reach of their hands. The crew of the *Queen* was plainly prepared for an argument. Each man carried a carbine and, in case the debate waxed hot, a broad saber, that time-honored and most effective argument at close range.

At this point Captain Skinner gave certain commands, in a voice not to be misunderstood. He was not posing now. His men leaped to obey, in a moment reappearing on the deck with every piece of armament that the ship’s chest contained. They were told to load their rifles and line up at the railing to await commands.

Skinner gave just one of his valuable minutes to Jeff. “Go down and get your rifle, Sharp, if you’ve got one,” he said. “It looks to me like war. If you ain’t got a gun, get one of those down there and line up with the others.”

Jeff straightened, looking the skipper in the eyes. “You can’t do that, you know,” he objected.

“I can’t, huh? Wait and see.”

“Those people are probably in their rights.”

“I’m in my rights, too. This is an American ship. No armed force is going to board her on the high seas. One war was fought on that point once before. A proud gent like yourself would look fine in irons, down below, while the ship went to London with a prize crew!”

The approaching boat was in fair rifle range by now, and again Skinner put his megaphone to his lips. "If you want to see my papers, go back and leave those weapons on your deck," he called. "You can't come alongside with that armed force."

Across the water they heard Captain Lennox speaking quietly to his men; and for a moment they rested on their oars. "We're not afraid of smugglers," was the reply. "We're coming alongside and we're coming aboard."

Captain Skinner addressed no further words to them. He turned to his crew and gave certain instructions. His men were to stand ready with their rifles, and when the longboat was approximately sixty yards distant Captain Skinner would command the first volley. Thereafter they were to fire at will. From their higher position, and being the kind of riflemen who habitually pick their targets instead of shooting in the enemy's general direction, it seemed probable they could inflict numerous casualties. Since Skinner was no longer careful to lower his voice, it was likely that his orders were overheard.

When he stopped speaking an ominous silence enveloped all. To Jeff, standing immediately behind the captain and wondering at his own strange thoughts, there seemed a valiancy in this water vista, a moving appeal beyond his immediate analysis. He could not look at it coolly. His firmest beliefs were powerless to annul it; and his old gods of scorn and hatred could not shut it out of his heart. Beyond the blue of the ocean he could see the forest, blue-black under thin October clouds. He saw the *Boston Dame*, like a ghost ship, in the harbor, then standing nearer, the *Queen*, one of England's far-sailing fleet. This side of her lay the longboat, a most vivid picture as she rolled easily on the swell and as her brave crew waited for their captain's command. Their carbines and their bright sabers made miniature lightning flashes as the steel reflected the almost hidden sun. On the deck of the *Ethan Allen* waited the Americans, humble men, most of them, but no less brave than the men in the longboat—all of them ready to risk death at a leader's command and for an old theme they did not begin to understand.

There would not be much more waiting. This was the pause before the storm; and it could only endure a few seconds more. The affair was rapidly reaching a crisis; and indeed, it was only the reluctance of either side to take the offensive that had prevented bloodshed so far. Both captains realized the possible far-reaching consequences of such an encounter and therefore hesitated to give the command to fire.

“We’re going to board you,” Lennox called. “If you fire on us, you do it at your own risk.”

“On our risk let it be!” was Captain Skinner’s answer. His voice was not without dignity, and indeed it had a deep, sober tone of one who is sure of his course in a moment of great trial, such a tone as has been heard now and then in council chambers when men responsible for tribes and nations have come to far-reaching decisions. “If you come nearer, we’ll open fire.”

Jeff knew, just as the British captain knew, that Skinner meant what he said. This was no idle threat; and now there seemed no further hope of peace. Every alternate man of the longboat’s crew had now picked up his rifle, holding it ready to aim and fire when Captain Lennox gave the word. His tactics were now plain: half his crew would keep the enemy engaged while the other half rowed alongside, whereupon his entire force would attempt to board. On the deck of the *Ethan Allen* was heard the grim sound of the cocking of rifles.

In another moment, it seemed, the first volley would ring out over the hushed sea; and how many souls would fly and how many women weep before its far-carrying echoes had died away, no man could dream. At this range there were certain to be heavy casualties on each side, even though the battle stopped immediately thereafter. And if there ever was a vain dream of foolish men it was that any great question can be decided with a single volley. In a calmer hour Jeff would have remembered that at the beginning of the Rebellion each side had been sure of early victory; his people had believed that Bull Run would end the war. Had the leaders been able to foresee the four red years to come, he believed that both armies would have withdrawn without firing a shot.

But Jeff could not remember such things now. The deathless curse which must have been laid upon the race when Cain slew Abel once more fell upon him, and in the ardor of this moment memory dried up in him as fallen apples dry under the ardent sun. An old, tragic zeal swept over him once more.

Could he remember all the things he had held dear? Could he as much as recall the theme to which he had consecrated his life? Is man no more than a leaf to be blown in the wind of a savage emotion that blows out of the savage years? The men in the longboat were Englishmen, and England had been his friend. They were of a great nation that he believed in far more than in the government of which he was a subject; and indeed they were a brave and a great people. The men here on the deck with him were all of the

Northern States, and doubtless many of them had actually borne arms against the South. In a more sane hour he could have held to his firm conviction that they were not his people, that they stood for the things he hated, and had nothing in common with him. Most of all he would have remembered that the flag which Captain Skinner had run up was the hated Stars and Stripes, the banner under which he had never thought to walk, much less to fight.

He was aware of no sharp distinction between right and wrong. Probably the British captain felt justified in attempting to board, with an armed guard, a possible smuggler; certainly Captain Skinner believed in the inviolacy of his deck. As it was in this little dispute, so had it been in the great Civil War: no one on this lowly earth knew exactly which side was in the right and which in the wrong. It is part of the old curse that in hours like these all abstract thought is clouded, and men know neither right nor wrong: they may only follow the blind dictates of their hearts. In this stirring moment, as the October clouds darkened above as if they were the lowering wings of death—in this momentary hush before the rifles spoke—Jeff's heart led him into a strange, unexpected course.

At first the impulse was vague, but as the tension increased and the crisis neared, the dim urge became an immutable command. It grew within him as the low whistle of the wind's breath grows to a yelling climax, as the long gusts sweep through the trees. Yet not until he heard his own answer to Skinner's question did he know his own mind.

"Open fire if they raise their rifles to their shoulders," he had just ordered his men. Turning, he looked Jeff full in the face. "You haven't your rifle that I told you to get."

"No, I haven't got it," Jeff answered. He spoke in a low monotone, in the voice of one overcome with wonder.

"Are you going to get it? Sharp, are you with us or against us?"

At these words, and at his answer, a lightning flash seemed to illumine Jeff's sky and sea and world. All at once he saw clear and far. The time might come when the light would dim and die, when bitterness and hatred would shadow him again, but now he knew the way.

"I'm with *you*, Captain Skinner!" he cried. And he banged a heavy fist on the railing of the bridge.

XXVI

THE crew of the *Ethan Allen* saw Jeff's stand and were upheld by it; but to none of these did it have a gleam of the meaning known to the girl who watched from the door of the pilot house. To Molly, it was significant beyond her power to tell. It was veritably an answer to her prayers.

Why she did not know. She felt in her heart that she was nothing to this man. Conduct as a rule counts more with women than abstract principle; yet this upholding of principle on the part of Jeff had personal meaning for her—and perhaps that was why it was so dear.

Captain Lennox was also made aware of Jeff's decision; and it possibly had a large influence on his conduct. From his place in the longboat he saw the young Southerner leap to the deck, procure a rifle, and immediately return to the bridge. It was true that here he made a good target for the enemy guns, but it was also an advantageous lookout for a marksman.

It did not occur to him to take his place on the line. In this moment Jeff remembered that he was an officer; and now at the eve of battle he instinctively leaped to the superior position. Over and above this, it was wholly characteristic of the gallant Rebel major to do more than he asked of his men; and to expose himself freely to fire if by so doing he could benefit his cause.

This was simply an instinct with him, a personal trait that appeared rather frequently in the brave Southern army. It was not mere bravado, vainglorious and reckless, because it was always done in the excitement of battle, in moments when he was least self-conscious; nor was it foolish indifference to danger. He was a fighting man, this Sharp. He had the natural zest for battle that has been the curse of the Northern races; and it was not in him to keep under cover. True, such conduct as he now showed results, in prolonged wars, in a tragic shortage of officer material, but it also wins battles—and before now it has held in check for four long years a superior enemy force. Men fight better when their leader is in front of them, rather than behind. Because he was a born soldier, Sharp knew this fact with an inner knowledge; and he acted upon it without hesitation or any sort of deliberation. Perhaps here was seen the explanation why born soldiers do not survive a long and bitter war; and by the same token showing war's most

unnatural cruelty in that it kills those who love it and spares the sluggish and the dull.

Such conduct not only inspires the men who follow, but also lessens the resistance of the enemy. On this present occasion Jeff's gallantry had tangible influence on Lennox and his men. The fact suddenly went home to these brave Britishers that the Yankees meant serious and certain business. A man does not so expose himself to fire unless his heart is in the battle with him, and therefore a dangerous foe. Their British guns might bowl him over, but these old soldiers—veterans of the Sepoy Rebellion and the Crimean wars—felt sure he would not pass out alone. If this showed the attitude of the men of the *Ethan Allen* it might pay to proceed with care.

There were other considerations which helped shape Lennox's course. He knew that if the Yankees actually showed fight, it would be next to impossible to board the deck from the longboat. It might also have been true that he was a certain unsavory sort that is warlike and tyrannical in the presence of the humble and the poor, but fawning and subservient to the great, although such types do not as a rule command British ships. There was no mistaking Jeff's rank as he stood erect on the bridge. If the Jack tars were too far to see his face, his bold nostrils, flashing eyes, and clear high forehead above which his curly hair was brushed back, at least they could tell something from his garb. Jeff believed in suitable clothes, and he knew how to wear them. While wrong done to a humble ship captain might never arise to plague him, perhaps Lennox feared the consequences of molesting some one rich and great. It was entirely possible that he was playing his own game rather than acting on orders from the Company, intending to pocket the profit accruing therefrom; and he feared official investigation in case the report of his activities got back to headquarters. Finally, there remained the possibility that the cargo contained nothing of great value. He was risking his life and the lives of his men on a blind chance.

In any event, Captain Lennox changed his mind. He gave the command to resume rowing, and without crossing the danger line Skinner had drawn, to return to their ship.

"We'll get you yet, you freebooters," he told them cordially, as the longboat moved farther off.

The effect on the deck of the *Ethan Allen* was electric. The hard gleam in Captain Skinner's sea-blue eyes instantly softened and changed to a very pleasant light of happiness—for indeed, he knew that almost incomparable happiness of a crisis past, a great disaster ward off. Being the master and

aware of that fact—never forgotten by skippers of an older school—he did not take part in the hilarity on the deck, but he beamed down upon it as a father beams on his children's play. His men, stand-up fighters when the occasion arose, had a very human and natural dislike for whistling bullets, and now they showed their delight at their escape. They did not call insulting remarks to the British, because they held them in the respect due a worthy foe, but they pranced and they danced, they gave imitations of Lennox's actions and accents, and finally they joined hands with the rapturous Molly and did an extemporaneous dance that should have been recorded for posterity.

The tall man who had stood exposed on the bridge neither joined in the frolic nor shared in Captain Skinner's unspoken delight. So silent he stood, seemingly so self-absorbed, that at last some of the joy-mad sailors stopped their dance to look at him. His cheeks were even more white than in the moment of greatest danger. He looked like one just wakened from sleep; and indeed that which he had just done seemed more like a dream than fact.

He now realized that he had borne arms under the Stars and Stripes! He had taken the side of his foes against the South's great friend, the incomparable Monarchy to which he had proposed to pledge allegiance. In a moment of hysteria and madness he had renounced his own cause!

Was he made of no stronger stuff than this? He was remorseful and embittered; and what was worse, he felt disillusioned and cheapened. He had known a great pride, Jeff Sharp; and he was born of proud people. No one could deny that. No one could ever question the intense and magnificent patriotism that had upheld so long the Confederate armies in the war just gone. When he had seen evidences of what he thought to be backsliding on the part of the Southern people—a tendency to forgive and forget, and the beginnings of a new loyalty to the Union now that their fervent sectionalism had begun to pass away—he was angered and revolted. What could he say now? He had thrown down the torch he had held high. His life had been consecrated, he thought, to the Lost Cause; that Cause had been his staff and his altar, and for its sake he had been willing to endure poverty, exile to a foreign land, martyrdom if necessary. He had lived by it, and it had given his life aim and purpose. It was true that many of the old Southern slogans, such as those concerning State rights, had lately seemed rather unimportant; yet he had still known what had seemed a deathless loyalty to the idea of a noble aristocracy, sustained by slavery, and he had felt only contempt for a people's government. In a moment of crisis he had disavowed all that he held dear.

What was the explanation? Why, in the fierce crisis of the moment just gone, had these on the deck seemed his own people, rather than the foe; what madness had made them his own kinsmen? Why was it that when the guns pointed he forgot his leaning toward England and looked upon them as enemies? Since he firmly refused to believe that such a course could possibly be right—since he held that forgiveness was a sin and that union with a foe was never justified—he could think of but two possible explanations for his behavior. One was that he had been the victim of mob hysteria; the other—which hurt him to consider—that there was a fatal flaw in his character and he was never the steadfast man he had believed himself to be.

He dreaded to see Molly climbing the steps to the bridge to speak to him. He felt that to be praised for what he deemed treason was almost more than he could bear. Sometimes he felt that this girl knew his thoughts almost before he was himself aware of them; but to-day she had no glimpse of his mood. “It was just wonderful,” she told him. The hushed tone with which she spoke gave her trite words imponderable meaning.

He had never seen this gay, capable girl so moved. In his images of her she was always close to laughter; and it was amazing to see her so grave, even though she was at the same time visibly exalted. Her eyes alone moved him to wonder; strangely large now, they were, and brimming with light that seemed no part of the light of the sea and the sky. It must have been close kin to the white radiance, real as any phenomena Jeff had ever seen, in the girlish face.

“I can never tell you how much it meant to me, and to us all,” she went on, smiling gravely. “It was the finest thing I ever saw.”

But so lost was he in bitterness and self-anger that he looked at her unmoved. The warm luster of her eyes could not thaw the ice of his heart. His own gaze was cold, almost hateful, and his lip curled in a smile of scorn. “I’m a fool,” he answered.

Puzzled, but still not daring to guess at the truth, Molly shook her head. “Maybe we’re all fools, sometimes, willing to risk our lives just for a dream; but it’s a wonderful kind of folly.” The girl was visibly inspired. “It’s the kind of folly that will lift the people up from darkness.”

“I’m worse than a fool. I’m a traitor to my own side,” he told her bitterly. “The people!” he echoed with infinite scorn. “I hate the people. It was the mob, the mob-idea that destroyed all I loved!”

“I am of the people,” she told him, her eyes never leaving his. “I’m just one of the mob.”

“And a patriot of a mob-ruled government! I wish I had never heard of it or its people.”

The girl did not misunderstand. It might be that his wild words were mostly boyish frenzy and extravagance; yet they showed certain truths. The cut would not have been so deep had he merely renounced the nation that she held so dear—she was a woman before she was a patriot—but he had not been kind enough to exclude her. He wished he had never heard of the Republic or its people, he said; and this was the same as wishing he had never heard of her.

She turned away and walked very bravely down the steps and across the deck. She stopped and spoke, smiling, to a group of the crew. She watched, for an instant, the slowly moving shore line, seemingly absorbed in its dim and mysterious beauty. But at last she went to her stateroom, shut the door and closed the port, so that no ray of light might come in and read what was written on her face.

XVII

WHEN MOLLY had gone, Jeff had a feeling that he had rather overdone the business on the bridge. Such emphasis as he had expressed had hardly been called for. He wished vaguely he had not covered so much territory in his condemnations. It was a cheap way out at best to relieve his own self-fury by storming at the girl. Possibly his strong words to Molly did not in the least palliate his disloyalty to the South, but rather enhanced it, in that by so speaking he had been false to the South's most treasured tradition, that of chivalry. Two wrongs never yet made a right. Possibly it would have been better to have saved his thunder for other ears.

He was a tender-hearted boy; and very soon he was really sorry that he had expressed himself so bluntly. He hoped he had not hurt Molly's feelings. If the subject were not acutely painful to him he would attempt to apologize. Of course a brave, self-reliant girl like Molly was not likely to be easily hurt; yet this fact did not excuse his own inconsiderateness. How really deep the hurt was Jeff Sharp did not dream.

He found himself speaking entirely politely to Captain Skinner who joined him on the bridge. "Well, we got through that safely enough, thanks to you and the boys," the skipper observed. "Jeff, that was a narrow squeak. We pretty near lost our skins as soon as we got 'em, and wouldn't that old Boston skipper had a laugh on us then—only he'd laugh out of the wrong side of his mouth."

"I don't believe they would have taken them," Jeff answered rather coldly—yet with none of the fire he had heaped on Molly.

Captain Skinner did not seem to hear him. His thoughts were down in the hold with the bales of glossy treasure. "It was mighty lucky for us them Britishers didn't know what we had," he went on. "I don't blame 'em for not wanting to risk their lives when they thought maybe they wouldn't get nothing but a bunch of coarse island fox and a couple of skunks to pay for their trouble; but for a thousand sea otter—my boy, we'd 'a' been fighting yet."

"I don't believe we'd have had the least trouble if we had let them come aboard in peace," Jeff argued. "I can't help but think we took a serious risk in repelling them when they were in their rights."

“Well, you sure are hard to convince. Jeff, they wasn’t in their rights.”

“They had a right to come and see our papers.”

“I’ll admit that, but not to bring an armed force alongside. You think Captain Lennox would ha’ turned around and stepped off polite and nice, and left them furs in the hold? He’d laugh at you for thinking any such foolishness. We’d be mighty lucky if he wouldn’t seize the ship as a prize.”

“Of course his crew might have mutinied at the sight of all those skins. I’ll admit that such is possible. But I’m just as sure as can be that no English gentleman like Lennox would do such an unsportsmanlike thing as to board us ostensibly to see our papers and then seize our cargo by force.”

“You don’t know some of these here English gentlemen. A lot of ’em act like us common folks when they see a thousand sea otter skins.”

“Well, we got through safely. We don’t have to fear anything at Sitka, at least. I did not know Lennox, but I do know those Russian noblemen.”

Captain Skinner did not argue the point, but as he walked away, he made a curious snorting sound which Jeff could hardly interpret. He seemed to infer that he took all kinds of noblemen with a grain of salt.

If Jeff had doubted his own words, certainly he was reassured when in an early evening the *Ethan Allen* pushed again into the Sitkan harbor. The picturesque old Russian town lay dreaming in the twilight, its lights subdued, its bold lines softened, its roofs and spires blending into the dusk; and its Old World charm and peace were for all to know and love. The harsh, wild Alaskan background was forgotten, and to-night this town belonged to old Europe instead of raw America. It was a quaint and gentle place; and crime and violence in connection with it were simply unthinkable. Jeff resolved that Skinner was an alarmist of the worst type, and that likely the skins were safer here than they would be in an American port.

The first day in Sitka seemed to bear out this supposition. No one came to marvel at the treasure in the hold. Life resumed its normal, happy course, except for one minor change: Molly seemed to avoid his presence. Somehow he had fallen into the habit of spending a great deal of time in her company; but this first day of his return to Sitka he scarcely glimpsed her from morning until night. Indeed it was a small matter, not to trouble one of his tastes and interests, yet it was annoying that she would absent herself on a day when he most needed her company. Why did he need it particularly today? Because everything seemed to go wrong, somehow, and the minutes

took their places like carriages in a parade—with long, aggravating pauses in between.

She was doubtless in a huff from his ill-selected words of the day before, but since she was just Molly she would likely be herself again soon. He could hardly reconcile a girlish sensitiveness with one so capable and self-reliant, a tomboy and hale-fellow-well-met like Captain Skinner's niece. Except for his firm resolve to keep all thoughts of his late madness out of his mind—his inexplicable attitude in the crisis of two days before—he would make some sort of apology to her; but for the sake of his own pride and self-satisfaction he could not bring himself to mention the matter again. Anyhow, she would certainly be herself next day.

He believed this as surely as he believed in the continued safety of the otter skins. The long afternoon had worn away, never brightened with a smile or a moment of gay talk from Molly, before he guessed that he had been altogether too optimistic regarding her. This was not the worst. When another gray twilight lay over the sea he was brought face to face with the fact that he had been similarly optimistic in regard to the otter skins.

Late in the afternoon the *Queen* had come into port, and after the supper hour there were official visitors on the deck of the *Ethan Allen*. No less a personage than Spaskii, the Czar's commissioner, accompanied by Count Yanovisk and young Lord Staritsa came in file up the gangplank for a short conference with Captain Skinner and the American correspondent.

They were all exceedingly courteous, and indeed were a courtly and polished trio. They bowed low over Jeff's patrician hand, as well as the horny appendage with which Captain Skinner pulled lowly ropes. They made pleasant remarks concerning the weather and urged that the Yankee sailor and the Southern gentleman pay them early calls. It was at this point in the proceedings that Jeff felt a faint touch of annoyance, almost of suspicion. It was wholly fitting that Cavalier Spaskii should wish to entertain him, a Southerner, but when he also invited this hardy, ill-spoken Yankee sailor, his sincerity was open to question. It was also vexing to make out the dim form of Baron Karl, tramping up and down the docks as if waiting for the official party to return.

"As a mere matter of form, we have presented ourselves to talk with you regarding your dealings with Captain Cooper, of the *Boston Dame*," Yanovisk got to business at last. "His Majesty's commissioner will assure you it is a mere matter of form only, yes?"

Spaskii could not speak English, but he evidently recognized a cue. He said a few words in soft, purring, soothing Russian. Certainly (so Jeff thought he said) this visit was a mere matter of form!

“Of course in addition to the pleasure of renewing our acquaintance—strengthening an already warm friendship,” Staritsa observed.

“You had certain negotiations with Captain Cooper, the commissioner understands,” Yanovisk went on.

“I understand so, myself,” Captain Skinner replied in obvious American. “What about ’em?”

“As a mere trifle—a mere matter of form—we would like to see what cargo you removed from his ship. This inspection is required on all goods taken into Russian-America, to provide against importation of contraband. If it meets with your esteemed favor we should also most like to see such papers as Captain Cooper put in your hands.”

He addressed these remarks to Jeff, who answered before Captain Skinner could put in a word. It would be quite like the old sea dog, given to untoward suspicion of his betters, to employ some sort of subterfuge to conceal the otter skins from the Russian’s eyes, perhaps leading them to some other part of the hold to show less valuable cargo. Sometimes the barrel-chested Yankee seemed well-named. Jeff felt certain, however, that only trouble would result from any attempt to deceive the officials—there were likely other channels through which they could learn the real nature of Cooper’s goods—and besides, Jeff had no real reason to suspect unfair dealing. Surely these gentlemen were not pirates.

“Of course you may see the stuff,” was the Southerner’s reply. “It is immensely valuable, and we are trying to guard it with care. If you want to take my word for it, instead of climbing below, it is—a thousand sea otter!”

The two Russians who understood English did not speak, plainly because they could not. They were not used to such tidings. In such moments the delicate mental functions necessary to translate excited Russian into courteous English were quite too much for them. They merely stared blankly, with eyes straight ahead; and Captain Skinner—perfectly aware that a half million in otter skins was no laughing matter—almost chortled in their faces.

Cavalier Spaskii was aware that something was going on beyond him. The startled silence was significant, and in one glance at his friends’ faces he

was sure he had missed a trick of which he should have knowledge. He spoke a few Russian words in a questioning and somewhat excited tone.

Yanovisk replied, stating the Russian equivalent of a thousand sea otter skins; whereupon there were three noblemen in the same, strange, pathological condition—no longer courtly, no longer garrulous, but all three temporary victims of instantaneous paralysis.

Of course they recovered almost instantly, but they had set Jeff to thinking. He could understand how Count Yanovisk, a man of humble means, might be stricken breathless at the thought of a half million haul of furs. That Staritsa and Spaskii were similarly stricken was unintelligible. He had idealized these men—at least he had tried to—and their mercenary instincts shocked him. Skinner, on the other hand, thought he understood perfectly. An old seafaring friend of his had once told him that, contrary to rumor, Americans were less gold-crazy than any people in the world, and that for sheer excitement at the sight of some actual money, the foreign count led all the rest; and now Skinner believed him.

Staritsa seemed to be particularly affected. He was the last man of the three to make complete recovery. Did he not know it was never becoming to one of noble blood to show such base interest in mere wealth? Could he not remember that high birth put him above such thoughts? And now Jeff was not only shocked, but vaguely uneasy, too. There was suddenly a most disconcerting gleam in Staritsa's eyes.

Neither this, nor the little hard lines on the young Muscovite's face, nor yet his intense preoccupation were lost on Captain Skinner. The latter paid no more attention to the Russian-American conversation. He watched Staritsa.

"Prime?" Yanovisk asked suddenly.

"Yes. They seem to be first class, and all mature otters."

"Our Lady of Kazan!"

Shortly after this Spaskii bowed himself away, but obeying his look, neither Staritsa or the Governor's secretary followed him. He seemed to have forgotten the formality of looking over Captain Cooper's permits. However, he was gone only a few minutes, during which Staritsa and Yanovisk looked at the furs.

Not long thereafter they heard the thump of heavily shod feet on the dock, and certain hoarse and unintelligible commands battered into the hush of the twilight. Four Russian soldiers, armed with muskets and bayonets,

marched up in the command of a Muscovite corporal. They came to a noisy order-arms just below the plank.

Even Captain Skinner, scarcely famous as a pacifist, did not so much as consider offering resistance to the Russian half-squad. He was in the Sitkan harbor and therefore subject, within certain limits, to the officials of the port; and besides, he could not whip the entire Alaskan garrison. As yet he did not know the run of the cards, so he quietly awaited the next deal. His only regret was that he had ever returned to Sitka; yet if he had read aright the smoke on the horizon behind him, no other course had been open. The *Queen* was a fast ship, and she had some long-range guns. Jeff also waited, and a spark that had lit in each of his black eyes was of deep significance to Skinner. For the present, at least, he had ceased to deplore his warlike stand of a few days before.

Cavalier Spaskii advanced up the gangplank, and bowing profusely, spoke a few words which Yanovisk immediately translated. "His Excellency begs your indulgence for his absence of a moment ago, yes," the latter explained. "He compliments his friends from the great American Republic."

"What else?" Captain Skinner asked, evidently failing to appreciate the fine points of the Russian's address.

"He says he is most regretful, but for the time being, until the goods can be legally cleared, he is required to post a guard of four Russian soldiers over the ship—purely as a matter of form."

XVIII

WHEN the official conference was all but over and the three Russians were about to take their departure, Yanovisk asked to see Captain Cooper's papers, thereby disproving Skinner's prophecies that no one would so much as glance at them. For once the old captain had surely misjudged the high-born Muscovites. Going into the captain's quarters, they not only looked at the permits and charters, but read all the fine print on the backs of the sheets and otherwise examined them with minute care. Yet their interest in the documents was no great triumph for Jeff. In the first place, reading them did not cause the governor to dismiss the guard. In the second, the incident itself was not without certain disquieting aspects.

As Yanovisk bent over the papers Staritsa spoke swiftly in Russian, a remark of course unintelligible to Captain Skinner and to Jeff, Yanovisk glanced toward Spaskii, saw him nod, and continued his reading with every sign of added interest. Yet it did not seem to Jeff that he was looking up some doubtful point. His absorption in the papers looked now like pretense, and fully on guard, he waited for enlightenment. It was not long in coming.

"They seem quite correct, your Excellency, yet I would like to suggest further scrutiny," Yanovisk began. "Mr. Sharp says himself that he does not personally know Captain Cooper, and it is our custom under such circumstances to make most complete investigations." He turned to Jeff. "You will not mind if I take these papers to my quarters where it is to examine them at my leisure, yes?"

Jeff got up and with dignity took the documents from the Russian's hands. "I would prefer to keep them on the ship," he said.

"Yes—we won't," was Captain Skinner's comment.

Staritsa moved into the center of the group; and there was nothing about him to suggest the gallant, courtly nobleman of an hour before. "Your Excellency, I believe you have the authority to seize those papers, if the American does not yield them freely."

Jeff's answer was to slip a band about the documents and put them in his pocket.

“You’ve got no more right to seize them than my crew has to seize you—and heave you head over heels over the railing,” Captain Skinner observed pleasantly. “And just about as much chance.”

All three Russians eyed Skinner intently and undoubtedly they received impressions not altogether favorable. He did not appear to realize that he came of an inferior nation; and indeed, he might create some little disturbance before submitting to their own noble wills. They observed that his face was lighted with a cheery smile—indeed, a smile of encouragement—but somehow they were disinclined to take advantage of it. Jeff, who should know better, seemed likewise unimpressed by their several highnesses, and his black eyes looked squarely into their own, instead of being humbly averted as was proper. There was also a look about his lips that boded no good. Perhaps it might be well to postpone the interview until a more likely time.

The commissioner bowed, stood up, and speaking a Russian farewell, led the way out of the cabin. A moment later the trio strode down the gang and disappeared. The four soldiers took their posts on the deck.

Jeff and Skinner, left once more to their own devices, eyed each other in silence. The latter’s grim and deadly smile slowly changed to a grin of real amusement; and presently he cackled, a strange sound in this cabin hushed and breathless in the aftermath of the crisis just passed.

“It’s not very funny, I should say,” Jeff remarked gravely. “We’re virtually prisoners on your own ship.”

“Sure. They weren’t going to take any chance on us getting away sometime in the night with them otter skins. I was laughing at the mess we’ve let ourselves in for. My boy, we’ll be lucky to get out of here with our own skins.”

“Of course, if we had let him have the documents we would have never seen them again.”

“Sure not. The next thing, they’d confiscate the fur and maybe the ship, and when you registered a kick through Uncle Sam, they’d say there never was no papers. They’d make out they caught you trading with the natives.”

“This is all Baron Karl’s work. I think Maksoutof is pretty much all right. Now what’s going to happen, Captain Skinner?”

“You know as well as I do; but we’re not licked yet. Who knows, maybe an American gunboat will come into the harbor. Lord, how I’d love to see one.”

On serious reflection, Jeff decided that he'd rather like to see one himself.

"What comes next?" This was the question that was frequently on Jeff's lips in the next few days. These days were entirely calm, the business of the town moved quietly ahead, and except for the presence and periodical change of the guard, there was nothing to remind him of the delicate situation brought about by the acquisition of the otter fur. But official Alaska had not forgotten him. Skinner never guessed that it had.

On the afternoon of the fourth day Jeff was called to a conference at the Executive Mansion; but although he was on guard, Jeff could not detect a single suspicious circumstance in connection with the meeting. The furs were not even mentioned, but only some matters dealing with America which Maksoutof and himself had discussed before. Staritsa came in about five, and seeing that the two Muscovites wished to confer, Jeff immediately left. As he walked down the hill he met Baron Karl and Templeton, the Englishman, on the way up.

Except when a deep bias blinded him, Jeff was ordinarily not slow in perceiving ulterior motives; but now it actually did not occur to him that there might be collusion behind this meeting. It seemed the most natural thing in the world. Ingenuousness is a Southern trait; almost an innocence, a faith in the right dealing of others. He assumed that these men were also on their way to confer with the government head. Perhaps because Maksoutof had quieted his fears, perhaps because he still had utmost faith in Templeton, he willingly paused to exchange a few words with the two men; and he was not particularly on guard.

"Here is the new fur lord, I understand," Templeton remarked pleasantly. "You Americans certainly trust each other—to hand about among yourselves a million rubles in otters."

Karl's remark seemed a natural development of his friend's idea. "Americans are a trusting race, is it not?" He smiled pleasantly. "Innocent, honest backwoodsmen trusting everybody—and not forgetting to expect every one to trust them in return, yes? And then when we trust them—well, you know what happens." He made a suggestive motion with his strong, deft hand.

Jeff had been twitted before about Yankee shrewdness—a trait which he, a Southerner, indignantly disclaimed—but he hardly thought that this was playing the game. If this were a joke, it was a poor one. "Your relations with Americans have not been happy," he suggested.

“Americans are overly—what you say—appreciative, of the trust that monarchs and governors give to special correspondents and so on,” Karl went on. “By arranging with their fellows, they can manage to turn the freedom allowed them into a handsome profit. Naturally, as you suggest, Templeton, good business demands that they keep trust with each other during these operations. What is the saying about honor among—how does it proceed?”

This was so bald, the insult so perfectly apparent, that Jeff actually wondered whether he had heard right. In any case, it seemed impossible to ignore the remark. “The expression is—‘honor among thieves,’” Jeff replied quietly. He was only slightly pale, and with his cane he accurately struck off the top of an outlaw weed. “Do you mean to tell me that you and your friends do not retain even this?”

Jeff had right to feel proud. This was thrust and parry with a vengeance. Suitable rejoinders suggest themselves readily a few minutes after an encounter; but are not always easy to think of on the spot.

Templeton’s smile showed plainly that this thrust was not lost on him. A bold, resolute, none-too-scrupulous man, this Englishman was not without a sporting sense that he never quite left behind him, a trait of all his breed. He liked fast and clever work, and even such deadly games as this had their entertainment for him.

Karl’s eyes flashed; and his manner showed that Jeff’s prompt reply had taken him somewhat by surprise. He turned to his friend.

“Templeton, was that remark merely an instance of a rail-splitter’s usual clumsiness at social conversation, or was it some sort of a veiled implication?” he asked. “I wish to be sure of my ground before I go ahead.”

“You are perfectly free to go ahead,” Jeff told him casually, “any way you like.”

“Good. I haven’t seen you in such an agreeable mood since the night we met—in the Governor’s gardens. By the way, Sharp, I have never heard from you in regard to the subject that came up that night.”

“No. You have been reticent about it yourself.”

“I take it, then, you merely wished to postpone the matter until such time as you could give it your attention? You are still, I trust, in the same mind?”

Jeff’s hands shook, but by putting them behind him, he hid them from the sight of his foes. He was ashamed of their slight tremor, and this was a

thing that would have brought tears to Molly's eyes, had she been there to see. It was so fine, so proud, so foolish with that dear, sad folly of youth that it would have gone straight to the heart of one who was wise with the eternal wisdom of Eve. "I am at your disposal any time you wish," he said.

A look of triumph overspread Karl's face. "Good. I shall enjoy meeting you. Shall it be to-morrow, just after sunrise?"

"That will be entirely to my satisfaction."

"Up Kolosh Ryeka trail, beyond the Governor's walk?"

"Yes. That seems a favorite place for your operations, Baron Karl."

"Indeed? I shall ask Mr. Templeton to be my second, and any further negotiations may be carried on between him and the person you choose to represent you. Perhaps it might be well now, however, considering the shortness of time, to appoint a master of ceremonies. Perhaps you, Mr. Templeton, could suggest a friend of both myself and Mr. Sharp, yes?"

"I would suggest our mutual friend, Staritsa," Mr. Templeton replied. "He is widely known as a sportsman."

"He is satisfactory to me," Jeff told him.

"And to me," Karl agreed. His face was startlingly pale except for the red wound. "Perhaps you will find out also, Templeton, whether Mr. Sharp prefers sabers or pistols. I believe it is his right to choose."

"Pistols," Jeff told them. "Considering that I never crossed sabers with a man, pistols would seem to furnish the more interesting encounter."

"I would think so," Templeton answered with evident sincerity. "It should be a very pleasant adventure for every one concerned."

XIX

As JEFF continued on his way down the hill, he was able to estimate his true position. There was no chance of further self-deception. He had walked into a trap, and the jaws had snapped home.

He realized now that this meeting on the hill had been carefully staged. Whether Maksoutof was a party to the conspiracy he did not know—he believed he was not—but certainly Staritsa was; he had purposely arrived a minute or so ahead of his friends so that they might have an opportunity to encounter Jeff as the latter descended the hill.

He had been forced into the snare partly by the machinations of his enemies, mostly by his own tragic, all-compelling pride. Oh, they had known how to take advantage of this pride! Karl had been careful to stage the meeting in Templeton's presence, thus making it certain that the Southerner would not ignore his insults. The plan had worked well. Although Jeff had known the Russian's reputation as a duelist, and that this was nothing less than a murder plot, it had been beyond his power to avoid or decline the challenge.

An affair of honor! Romantic youth though he was, he laughed at the thought. There was no more honor in this thing Karl had plotted than in an assassination by a footpad. There was less: the footpad ran the gauntlet of the law, while Karl was careful to remain within the law. The footpad's victim had some sort of a fighting chance while Karl, secure in his own tried skill, meant that Jeff should have none at all. The stakes in either case were something of the same nature. The Southerner was no longer deceived. Not honor, not revenge, not the sentiment of an old war; but a cargo of otter skins was the certain target for this shooting on the hill.

Yet Jeff could not turn aside. Knowing all that he did know, it was not in him to run away. He did not know why, and he had no arguments to support his stand. To carry on was his inner law, and he could not help but obey: such was the price of his pride.

Karl had arranged everything to his own satisfaction. Jeff had permitted him to name—through a confederate—really to appoint the master of ceremonies; and his choice was that of a man whom the former mistrusted and disliked. This seemed only a minor point, yet it increased the odds

against him. Questions might possibly arise, the decisions on which would be vital to Jeff's chances; and the chance for fair play on these was long and far. It was absurd to deny that Staritsa was biased in Karl's favor. Indeed, he was one of the conspirators that had forced the Rebel into the duel, and without doubt would share in the plunder in case of the Russian's victory.

Staritsa was reputed a sportsman, but Jeff scorned the thought. Real sportsmen did not play this kind of a game. For one instant Jeff found himself questioning the virtue and justice of a system that could sustain a man like this in a place of glory and power. There was one fear, however, that Jeff was spared: actual betrayal on the dueling field itself.

He did not doubt but that he would be given the duelist's chance—almost hopeless though it was against a superior opponent—and this was an immeasurable consolation to the youth who to-morrow, far from his own people, must play a lone, deadly game. He felt secure in this, partly because his faith in princes was not yet dead—even a degenerate nobleman, he thought, could not stoop to black betrayal of the old, honored code of fairness to a foe—and partly because Karl was perfectly secure in his own prowess. Such had been the Russian's record that, without recourse to base trickery, he could surely rely on victory over this inexperienced adversary. In this lay Jeff's one hope, and he had seen or heard nothing to make him forsake it.

Some of his ideals lived in him yet; and kind circumstance had made no provision that to-night they should perish. No strange coincidence brought him under a certain window of the Governor's house, to overhear an enlightening conversation. Only the old ghosts that haunted the garden and often hovered at the casements to survey the scenes where once they had known life and laughter heard the hushed words; and they could not carry them to Jeff's ear.

The darkness hid the speakers, sitting in a side room; and the sound creeping out was as of two disembodied voices. The language used was an old tongue from beyond the sea; and sometimes the ghosts were chilled with cold gusts of laughter.

"So everything turned out well—just as you planned! You are a genius, my friend. It is by all means the best way."

"I think so. It will look better to certain people in St. Petersburg—it saves us trouble and embarrassing explanations. You are to be master of ceremonies, as we planned. Templeton is my second. I don't know who his second will be."

“How did he seem to take it? Terrified, I’ll warrant.”

“To tell the truth, he took it with considerable spirit. That is the one thing I can’t understand. I expected him to accept; he was virtually forced into it, and as you know, he prides himself on knowing the code—on being a gentleman; but I didn’t expect him to be so easy, and I was surprised how calm he seemed. He is either a braver man than I give him credit for, or very self-confident.”

“Of course he has seen considerable fighting. The Civil War was no backyard squabble. I should say the explanation is that he is unaware of your reputation.”

“No. I don’t think he can be. The girl on the ship—Molly, they call her—seems to know a good deal about me—probably because of an idle feminine curiosity—and she has likely repeated everything to him.”

“I can think of only one other explanation—a rather disquieting one.”

“I know what you mean. You think he is confident of winning.”

“Precisely. That he has had enough experience with a pistol so that he thinks he can beat you at your own game.”

“And you say—it is a disquieting possibility?”

“It is at least a possibility. Listen, my friend. You know there is no one who has greater confidence in you than I: otherwise I would not have followed you into this wilderness after the scrape in Moscow. But how do we know about this American? You know what Lennox told us—how he climbed on the bridge in plain view of the riflemen—”

“Perhaps he is just a fool. Perhaps his seeming bravery is mere folly—”

“Perhaps, but Lennox did not get that idea. He is a soldier, in the first place—a major whose service was so distinguished that Lennox heard of it in England.”

“Even a little bravery might carry far in an army of rail splitters.”

“Just the same—what do we really know of him? Let me bring up another point. Have you ever heard of the gunmen who throng the American frontier?”

“Who hasn’t! You don’t think it possible—”

“I think it entirely possible! I don’t mean that he is, strictly speaking, a gunman, but he may know how to handle a pistol in a way that would

surprise us. You know that the best duelist in Europe could not stand against one of the plainsmen whom the Archduke described. How do we know he doesn't know that game?"

"By our Lady, perhaps he does know!"

"It would be a sweet thing, would it not, for you to fall with a bullet through your throat in combat with an American plowboy and a dolt. It would be a fine tale to tell around St. Petersburg. And I would play false to you if I did not urge the possibility of it occurring."

"You have done exactly right. I am careless about such things. But what good does it do to tell me, my friend, unless you can also suggest a remedy?"

"There is no remedy, as long as you both stand up and shoot. It does no good to urge you to take special precautions, because a man who gambles with his life always does take precautions—even if there is a country dolt behind the engaging pistol. You know, my friend, accidents sometimes occur. The only remedy that is sure is—one that is sure."

"You mean—some such little assurance as no powder in the fellow's gun?"

"Yes. No powder in the cap, which is better. A cap can be easily lost in the grass, but an empty gun is—conspicuous by its emptiness. I have often devoted idle thought to such problems as this, and have hit upon several safe means of solving them."

"Perhaps they occurred to you after your little affair in Moscow."

"Quite likely. Sometimes they are difficult to put into practice, but not when one's best friend is master of ceremonies! The only difficulty that remains is—a certain natural reluctance to employ such tactics thus to protect one's self. You know, I would be the last one in the world to suggest such an artifice in an affair of honor; but you would think me a comedian if I should refer to to-morrow's affair in that light. The laws of chivalry have always held that a duel can only exist between men of the same station; that when an engagement occurs between people of opposite station—I mean between a noble and a peasant—it can not be called a duel. Therefore, it seems to me, we are under no obligation to observe the duelist's code. To-morrow's engagement is simply an expedient, and you know that fact as well as I do."

"You argue the case very well. In fact, you have me convinced. There is no reason why, in a case like this, we shouldn't make assurance doubly sure."

But, little brother, we must have safety. Safety for you as well as for me, if you know what I mean.”

“Leave that to me. There will not be the slightest risk. We shall load both pistols, and the Czar himself may look at them later and find nothing wrong. It will be no fault of ours if the percussion cap used in firing the enemy pistol proves defective! As you know, sometimes inferior caps are fabricated, and this one—to our great sorrow—will contain no powder!”

“And later, when the seconds make examination, they will find that the man was felled before he had time to fire his own weapon?”

“To be sure. The worst that could possibly happen would be that they should pick out the defective cap and examine it, but even in that case we could plead entire innocence. However, that would be bungling. No such thing will occur. The moment you fire I will run to the man’s side and will snatch up the weapon to see that there has been no foul play. As I look at it, the cap will fall out and will not be seen again, and if necessary the weapon itself can be recocked to indicate that it has not been fired. I will put it into the second’s hands before he has had time to more than glance at his man, and he will never even question but that everything has been entirely regular and fair. The only precaution is—you must not miss! In that case, he might hear his gun misfire, would investigate, and would of course refuse to go ahead with the duel on the grounds of conspiracy. You must take your time: otherwise all our trouble would be for nothing.”

“Don’t worry about me. Make the duel at ten paces, and I won’t miss. I can drive a nail at that distance, almost. Now about Templeton. He would have to be informed of the plan in order to insure its proper execution—and Templeton might not see this thing the way we do.”

“I’m quite sure he would not see it the way we do. These Britains have queer ideas as to the fitness of things—particularly when a contest is involved. I fear we will have to leave out Templeton.”

“Then we give up the plan?”

“Most certainly not. I will have the pistols in charge, and when I offer them, the seconds will naturally select the nearest pistol to them in the case. What more is needed? The fewer who know about our plan the more certain its success—and the less danger of an unpleasant tale getting back to our royal master in Petersburg—to whom too many unpleasant tales have already gone. If by some great mischance Templeton or the enemy second should reach to the further pistol, instead of the nearer, and I see no easy way to get them to change, I shall simply suggest that both men examine

their weapons thoroughly before engaging—like the zealous master of ceremonies that I am. When you examine yours the cap will accidentally fall out, and you shall ask me to provide another. Of course in that case it will be—the best man wins.”

“You are certainly thorough, my son! I give you more honor than ever. It seems, then, that everything is arranged.”

So it seemed. Evidently no effort had been spared to make to-morrow’s affair an overwhelming success for every one concerned. The old ghosts whimpered in the darkness outside the window, but they were but airy dreams of the glory and strength they once had been; and the movement of events was beyond their power to influence. Meanwhile Jeff walked the Sitkan streets, unaware of such gray forms as might now be walking beside him and trying so vainly—perhaps in atonement for wrongs done in their own brief hours, when time was a moving river passing them by instead of a silent sea on which they sailed at will—to make their whispered voices heard. For all he knew he was utterly, eternally alone.

XX

MUCH cruel disillusionment had been Jeff Sharp's portion in the last few days. He had lost much, and he had gained nothing to take the place of that which he had lost. Many of his fondest precepts had been proven untrue. Many of his gods had shown feet of clay. Now, in this bitter hour of an October night, some of his own self-belief passed away, not to return.

He was so proud, this Sharp. He could never, since his childhood, admit defeat. He had built a strong house to shut himself in, during the black days following his return from Lee's army—a house of estrangement, of scorn, most of all of stern, unconquerable pride—but now it was falling down about his head. Now he had learned that the mere desire to believe a thing did not make it true; that reality followed him even into his secret castle of dreams.

He had felt sure of himself; and with an iron will he had repressed all self-doubt. He had dreamed of never, never yielding; even though every comrade submitted to a new order, to the change that years might bring, he would still remain unconquered, still hold his head high. Confidently he had hoped of finding another order, somewhere, like the old one he loved—out of sight of the conqueror's flag, away from his own people in whom he had begun to see signs of readjustment and submission—an order where things were as he wanted them to be, and where his dreams came true; but lately, in these last days of revelation, this hope was shown as baseless folly. There was no land short of the Kingdom of Heaven which fulfilled his ideals. Yet he had not staked everything on this. He had one high hope to fall back on; one strong tower that he thought would never fall.

He had believed with a fierce ardor that, no matter if everything he held dear was broken and destroyed, he could play a lone game clear to the end. No matter what he lost, he could not lose this: his ability to stand alone. He could live his life, if need be, with never a shoulder touching his or a smile reflecting happiness into his eyes. He had dreamed he could remain self-sufficient to the last.

Was this also only a dream? Would it go the way of all the rest? To-night he had found out that of all the tides of fortune, that which casts a man upon the desert isle of loneliness was the darkest and most chill. Would his strong heart break as he fought through its long, lightless waves? Could it bow his

erect head? Could it break his proud spirit, a Southern heritage that had been given in all fullness to him? The soul of man is a timid, wistful thing that can not wing its way alone: this Jeff learned in his hour of supreme need.

He had never tasted real loneliness before; and he had never known how bitter it was. In this last night before the dawn of his destiny he knew only too well. For the first time in his life there was no friend to seek, no hand to touch. It is good to go into battle for a high cause with cheering comrades at his side; but the way was cheerless and dark when he must walk alone. The men to whom he had offered friendship had either refused it or had so fallen in his estimation that they were no longer acceptable as friends. In all this town of Sitka, the abode of noble gentlemen from beyond the seas, he knew of no one whom he could ask to stand beside him, as his second, in tomorrow's hour of trial.

The Russians all wanted him to lose. They coveted his furs. Captain Skinner he had belittled, patronized, and lorded over throughout their acquaintance; he had felt scorn for him in his heart even if he had not showed it in his conduct, and he could not ask his help now he was in need. It was not that he feared Skinner's refusal. The old Yankee would not only serve to the best of his ability, but probably start a few duels on his own account if the fight went against his young charge. Jeff was simply too proud even to let him know about the duel with these men he had exalted, much less to ask his assistance against them. He felt largely the same toward the men of the crew.

It came to him with a poignant sense of loss that there was still another whose help would be precious to him but whom he could not ask. This was a certain companion of these past stirring weeks, a steadfast comrade who had served not only as his second but as a staunch ally in a previous affair of honor on the Kolosh Ryeka trail. The help she could give him was moral only; yet he wanted it as he had wanted few things in his life. Perhaps that was the trouble with Jeff: he had never known, until this hour, what real longing was.

Everything would be quite different if he could talk over the affair with her; if he could walk out in the dawn to meet Baron Karl with her godspeed lingering in his ears and the memory of that strange light, seen now and again in her eyes, guiding him on. Yet now, when he needed her most, he could not have her. He had estranged her with vain, foolish words.

Yet he was too proud to go to her with an admission of his vanity and folly. Again his great pride had come between him and peace. The trait once

had been his secret boast—he had taken a childish satisfaction in it—and he had regarded it as a birthright, an obligation owed to himself. Now he thought about it, he had always been conscious of great self-debts; he had owed himself this and that; he must take this stand or that one because such was his due or was seemly to one of his exalted place. Could it be that in his zeal to do his duty to himself he had forgotten duty to others? In flaunting the banner of his pride had his standard of service fallen in the dust? In building his high tower had he missed his shift in the common work crew who built for all humanity? In gathering to himself ramparts to sustain his station had he lost much that could not be regained?

Perhaps he should have given more thought to this. It might be that the time had come to forget himself and to remember some one else. His great pride had not humbled his enemies, but had only estranged his friends. It had not hurt those who had hurt him, but had cut to the quick those who had meant well by him, those who might have loved him and helped him. Perhaps the hour was at hand to put it by, and to seek some other faith.

As this thought gleamed, like a star, in the darkened universe of his mind, he changed his course and turned down toward the sea. He made straight toward the old quay where the *Ethan Allen* was lying. It seemed to him that considering the cloudy night and the dim oil lights the path was amazingly plain to see and follow. It was almost light.

There was no hesitancy in his step now; only a trembling, boyish eagerness that once might have shamed him. He wondered how he had failed to miss this path until now. It was the plainest thing, lying waiting for him to take now he had passed through the iron gate. He had stumbled about in the fearful dark, like a lame child, and all the time the happy road was open. He could hardly keep from running.

He crossed the quay and walked up the plank to the deck of the American ship. Captain Skinner was taking his ease on the deck, smoking his clay pipe; but Jeff gave no sign of pausing to visit with him. He did, however, call to him as he walked past.

“Where’s Molly?”

“I don’t know. In her stateroom, I reckon. Where you been and where you going so much in a hurry?”

Except that he went aft in the direction of Molly’s stateroom, Jeff made not the least response. Followed by the skipper’s wondering stare he went down a short flight of steps, into a passage, and halted before a stateroom door.

“Who’s there?” a voice called at his knock. It was incredible to him that he had ever, by vanity and folly, let this voice be shut away from him when it was so real a need.

“Jeff,” he told her, simply and humbly, “I want to come in.”

He did not command entrance; he simply told the truth, that he wanted to come in to her. He had never wanted anything quite this way before. In the long pause after he spoke he thought he could hear her troubled breathing, so deep a spell of silence had been cast over the ship that floated on the dark sea, in this hushed, dark night. At first the girl seemed unable to answer him.

“Are you sure—Jeff—that you care about seeing me?”

For an instant he felt the throttling hand of his pride—lifted up again to hold him aloof and from the comfort of surrender—but he tore it away. He must concede some little pride to others. He had forgotten about this until now. Others also felt the need of such fortification against ingratitude and stinging words and cold contempt, such buffets as crush the velvet wings of that hungry, light-seeking moth which is the human soul. He could not deny her her moment of pretended aloofness.

“Molly, I’m sure,” he told her. “I’ve come to ask help.”

He knew that these words would open the door. He knew also that they atoned as far as he ever could atone for his slight to the girl a few days before; they revealed the fullness of his surrender. It took all his strength of will to utter them. Not many times had he asked help of any one, and there were men alive who could not have been made to believe he had done so. Yet the words were straight-forward, clear, and loud enough that the wondering girl behind the locked door could not fail to understand.

There is nothing so effective in dispelling clouds of suspicion and enmity as a request of this kind. Molly opened the door, wide as it would go. Jeff bowed his erect head and stepped through.

She looked at him breathlessly, and as his eyes met hers he saw that she was pale, drawn, and worn-looking as he had never expected her to be. Somehow he had never thought that her bright tints could fade or that pain could shadow her eyes and track over her face; so capable she seemed, so self-reliant that he had deemed her beyond the possible reach of pain. She had always ridden boldly above all disaster and untoward circumstance; but now he knew her as a childlike, stumbling, fragile human being, just as he himself was. This fact brought her nearer to him.

She was plainly startled by his coming; but now she had a look of disbelief, too, as if an impossible, glorious thing were coming true before her eyes. And indeed, the bowing of this proud man—the change since she last saw him—had to be numbered among the few miracles that her life had known.

“I was a cad on the bridge that day, Molly,” he told her simply. “I didn’t mean anything against you. I couldn’t bear to leave you without saying this —”

“Are you leaving—?” She seemed almost unable to shape the words.

“I’m leaving for good and all, like as not. I’m meeting Karl to-morrow, and since I probably won’t live to see you again—I want to be sure that you have forgiven everything.”

XXI

IN a few brief sentences Jeff told of to-morrow's crisis, of the challenge and his acceptance. Molly was pale when he came in, but that mere absence of her usual gay color was not to be compared with this stark, chalk whiteness in which her eyes now burned. At last she stopped him by her hand, icy and trembling, touching his.

"You can't, you can't, Jeff!" she told him, shaking her head and searching his eyes. "You must not do this thing! If you won't stop on my account, you must remember your duty here, for America! Jeff, you must go away to-night."

He smiled gravely at her zeal. "Molly, you wouldn't have me run away! You couldn't bear to have one of your countrymen show the white feather!"

"Oh, you can't mean this." Her hands groped again at his. "Don't you see your life isn't your own now, and you have no right to risk it? You have your work to do—to put through this big thing you were sent up here to do. You can't betray that trust!"

His rounding eyes showed his amazement. "Molly, do you know my real purpose up here?"

"Of course. How could I keep from guessing it in these weeks we have been together. Jeff, you must escape from here to-night. I'll find a way."

"Molly, if there were a thousand ways of escape, I couldn't take one of them. I can no more avoid that duel now, than I can avoid breathing. You don't understand and I can't make you understand, but just the same, the keeping of that contract with Karl is the first law of my life. It is a matter of honor more sacred to me than anything else in the world."

"Oh, what do I care for your idea of honor? I only know you are walking up there deliberately to be killed by an assassin. You say yourself it was a trap—"

"A trap that I walked into, and can't walk out of. Now I must see the thing through. Not only my honor—which you make light of—but my self-respect is at stake. Please don't ask me not to go, Molly—I'll have to go anyway. It won't make it any easier."

"I know you'll go, well enough." Her tone now had changed to one of profound bitterness. Suddenly she realized that her tears were wasted on him; and this was not a mere belief—otherwise she would kneel at his feet, if need be—but unqualified conviction: he would go to meet his man in spite of her. She could not change him. Though men are children in women's hands in some things, in others—strange, witless things in woman's eyes—they are like iron. "Men will always go to fight, no matter if their own babies plead with them to come back. What do you care for us—what does any man care for any woman, when she gets in the way of some wicked thing he wants to do! We're just dust to step on!"

She looked up with blue eyes flashing with the light of her vision. He took her fluttering hand and held it in his.

"You don't understand," he told her. "I suppose woman never can understand about this. But you haven't interpreted this thing right, Molly, though I suppose I can't convince you. I came here to get your good wishes before I go into the night."

"And I give 'em, with all my heart. But that won't turn his bullets away from you."

"You don't know. I want you to be sure you forgive me, everything—"

"Yes, everything. Even going, Jeff, in spite of my prayers. We always forgive you—even when you are going to throw away a life that doesn't belong to you."

"But I'm not going to throw away my life." His hand tightened on hers until she felt pain. "Molly, I'm going to come back. I'm going to win."

Convinced that he was merely trying to cheer her with assurances which he knew to be false, she glanced dully into his eyes; but at the first glance her interest quickened. Then suddenly held a vivid, magnetic light she could not deny. Certainly he was bouyed up with new hope.

"You said—when you first came in—that probably you were going to your death—"

"But that was—when I first came in!" His brilliant smile flashed over his face. "A great deal has happened since then."

"Nothing has happened. I just pleaded with you not to go—and you said you would go—anyway." A gleam of hope flashed across her stark-white countenance.

“Yes, I’m going anyway—I have to go. Let’s not talk about that phase of it any more. Molly, something has happened—something that matters more than I ever dreamed. You’ve given me your good wishes.”

“Can that make any difference—to *you*!”

“Molly, when I came up here I had just tasted a more bitter drink than I ever dreamed was brewed on the earth. The name of that drink was loneliness. I felt that there was no one in the world who was really interested, except maybe regarding the furs, whether I came through that fight to-morrow, or whether I fell. I didn’t mind so much not having a second actually at the front with me, but I wanted—and I needed—a second somewhere behind the lines, praying for me to win. I’m not the man I thought I was, Molly. I can’t play a lone game. Once I thought I was independent of every living human being in the world, but I found out different to-night. When I came in here a few minutes ago I was already beaten and down. Somehow, my *hope* seemed gone; and a man can’t fight without hope.”

No one could doubt his earnestness. He spoke quietly, yet his tone rang like a bugle call. “Molly, I was afraid; I tasted fear at its worst. And now, just because I’ve come back to your friendship, all my fear is gone.”

“But just because a man is not afraid, it doesn’t mean he will win. Brave men die, the same as all the others.”

“Just the same, confidence of winning helps a man to win. At least, I’m not beaten at the start, as I was. Why shouldn’t I win, Molly? I’ve handled a pistol all my life. I used to clip off the head of a wild turkey with an old flintlock pistol of my fathers. I’m fighting on the right side, instead of the wrong, and that’s a factor too.”

Certainly some of his confidence passed to her. Her color once more glowed faintly in her cheeks, enhanced by the glamor of her flaxen hair. “You *must* win, Jeff,” she told him with deep solemnity. “Now tell me—what were you going to ask me to do? You said you came to ask help—”

“I didn’t have any definite thing to ask. I just knew I needed help and I came here for it, and you have given it to me. New heart—that is what you’ve given me.”

“And you don’t mean any real material help?”

“You’ve given me just that thing.”

"I don't know whether I have or not, but I'm going to, if such a thing is possible! Jeff, who are you going to ask to be your second?"

"I haven't anybody. The way I feel now, I wouldn't mind asking your uncle."

"I don't want you to ask Uncle Dave. He would do it gladly—but he's a man himself, with man's folly. He'll be too absorbed in the game to watch like I want you to be watched. You know who is going to stand beside you to-morrow?"

"No. Who is?"

"Molly Forest!"

He stared at her to see if he was to take this literally; and he read his answer in the bright, intent beam that reached his eyes from hers. Molly meant exactly what she said.

Jeff knew in advance the folly of arguing against the girl's stand; but it can be said of him that he made an earnest and determined effort to dissuade her. He explained that it might be a most terrible ordeal for her, that a dueling field was no place for a delicate woman; and in addition to this, such a thing was wholly unprecedented as far as he had ever heard. Dueling was a man's game, he pointed out; and it was not playing quite fair to introduce into it a factor that might have a disturbing effect upon his opponent. He admired her courage, he said, admitting that her decision to second him in to-morrow's fray was wholly in keeping with her positive, determined, spirited nature; but out of chivalry to her as well as respect for the rules of the game he could not let her carry out her intention.

She smiled throughout all his remarks; and he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was making no headway whatever. At last she summed up her position in a few words.

"I'm going, Jeff, whether you like it or not," she told him simply but emphatically. "I don't want you to fight this duel, but if you will anyway, I'm going to do all I can to help you. I'll be on the scene to-morrow, whether or not you let me officiate as your second. You will say that I have no right, and I say to you a woman doesn't have to have any right to do what her instincts bid her do. If we went by men's rules of right and wrong this would be a far different place from what it is to-day.

"I only hope my presence *will* have a disturbing influence on Baron Karl. The more I disturb him the better I will like it; if he thinks best, he can refuse to go on with the duel. I have no respect whatever for the precedents

or the traditions of such a game as this. It isn't a game—it's a crime, that's what it is. I have only hatred for the whole thing, and don't admit that it's an affair of honor; the thing was forced on you, and you say that yourself. Jeff, you can forget your chivalry in regard to me if it inclines you to try to keep me off the dueling field. I am not a child, and I can bear the sight of blood if I have to. Any place men go, women can follow if by so doing they can help. It's part of woman's destiny to endure more than man ever dreamed of.

“I'm going with you, my friend. I am going to stand beside you—just as real women have always had to stand beside men. I think you will have a better chance if you have at your side some one to uphold you as only a woman can uphold a man, and some one to watch over you—and that better chance is all I care about. Nothing else can influence me.

“We'll fight this thing through together, man!” She stroked his lean hand. “My brave man!” Then, smiling wistfully, “my brave little boy.”

XXII

WHEN the gray dawn lay over this Alaskan shore, Jeff arose and laid out the best street clothes he owned. Thus it was to be seen that some of his great pride still lingered with him; but this was not the kind of pride that would cast him into darkness. His sleep had been broken, disturbed by wretched dreams; and now he felt tired and listless.

He was only human, and it was beyond him to put away the thought that this might be the morning of his destiny. Long-established habits helped him dress; and he was really not conscious of fastening buttons and pulling on boots. He was depressed rather than frightened; yet as he tried to straighten to his old, proud stature he felt a certain weight of dread.

He found Molly waiting for him on the deck, hoping until now against hope that nervous exhaustion might cause him to oversleep the engagement. She greeted him with a smile; and truly it warmed his chilled heart. Last night he had really deplored the girl's decision to act as his second; but he could not even pretend to do so now. He was a soldier, the veteran of one of the most terrible wars that was ever fought upon the face of this earth; but at the same time he was Jeff Sharp—lonesome, an exile, and less than thirty years of age.

Molly would be with him at the finish. Although she was surely far removed from him in many things, the promise of her presence then was the dearest consolation he had ever known.

He found himself brightening in the clear, steadfast gleam of her eyes. His listlessness passed away, and he was able to direct his mind to other channels than that of the deadly business awaiting him on the Kolosh Ryeka trail. He listened to her talk, and he made intelligent answers. Very soon he resumed his old carriage, something of his usual high spirits.

She had breakfast ready for him, and they ate it together in the galley. She did not need to encourage him to eat; and they talked of varied things. She did not, however, offer him strong drink, and he did not ask for it. It was true that the fiery liquor might give him false courage, drive the last little chill of fear out of his heart, but at the same time it might induce a fatal recklessness. He needed all his powers to-day. The delicate processes of his

brain and the fine coördination between mind and muscle must not be impaired.

After breakfast they walked through the town, across the bridge, and up Governor's Walk toward Mt. Vestovia. This was a still, somber morning; and except for Molly's presence, he might have been depressed by it, and believed it was prophetic. The spruce had that dark look often seen under autumn clouds; they were silent, impassive, and aloof, fitting sentinels over this new, unconquered land.

When they reached the appointed place—a little clearing among the tall, dark trees—they found Staritsa waiting, accompanied by Stevock, a surgeon from the hospital. The former had his case of pistols, the latter bandages and ligatures.

Staritsa's smile was serene; yet he was plainly susceptible to the atmosphere of excitement and suspense that already lay over the glade; not only keenly responsive to it, but perhaps enraptured too with that dark ecstasy remembered since first the cliff folk chattered and howled at the sight of a bloody combat. This was the kind of thing that soon stretched human nerves to the breaking point. Fortunately, there was no long waiting. Baron Karl, accompanied by his second, came up the hill and joined the company.

He also was dressed in his best; his instinct was to honor, in this degree at least, his youthful adversary. He opened his eyes when he saw Molly.

"My opponent has a fair second," he said to Templeton. "What a pleasant little family matter this is!"

He bowed to her, then to Jeff. The latter, hoping to play the game according to its best traditions, bowed in return.

The Russian's air of perfect confidence could not be mistaken. His smile as he bowed to the company had the faint suggestion of a leer; yet if he had hoped to lessen Jeff's resistance by his own self-assurance it was in vain. The man from North Carolina was beyond that now. In spite of the increasing suspense, the hushed breathlessness of the hour, he was really amazingly cool. The absent-mindedness and deep bewilderment which so often accompanies great mortal trial had departed to the last vestige; he was no more inclined to start when some one spoke suddenly to him, his vision was clear, and he was free of that reflex chill that comes from the swelling tide of rushing blood compressing the sensitive walls of the veins. Beyond all this he felt somehow upheld by a strength emanating from a brave heart

other than his own, safe as though held in sheltering arms that he had long ago known and loved.

Staritsa's first official duty was to load the pistols, which he did in plain sight of both principals. They saw him put in powder and wads, and in each a cruel pellet of lead which, propelled by the powder's savage force, could find its way to the fount of a man's life. Every one watched his motions as he took two small disks from a box of percussion caps, inserted them with care, and dropped the pistol hammers lightly upon them. Then, replacing the pistols in their case which now rested at the base of a great tree, he stepped off ten paces in the middle of the clearing and drew two lines in the soft earth. Then he called the two principals to his side while he gave final instructions.

They were very simple. After the first hit, either man could withdraw from the fight or, if the injury were slight, they could by mutual agreement fire another volley. They were to take their places at a distance of ten paces and face opposite direction until he ordered "fire,"—upon which command both men were to turn and discharge their pistols. The surgeon was to stand ready to treat any injury.

His entire discourse occupied only a few seconds of this fleet hour. He now picked up his pistol case, and the great care with which he handled it indicated that he was fearful lest a slight jar should fire the weapons prematurely. He held the case for the seconds to make their choice of weapons.

Molly took the gun nearest her in the case; and Templeton the one nearest him.

Now the time had come for the two principals to take their places. Standing back to back at a distance of ten paces, they waited for the word "fire," their guns pointing in the air.

Jeff's blood was leaping swiftly now, but he still had that most meaningful of all eminences, mastery over himself. The hand that held the pistol was fairly steady; and even now those strange, secret forces of brain and nerve and muscle—mysterious monitors of his being—were focusing on the thing he meant to do.

He had already decided on his tactics. He knew that this duel had never been engineered to satisfy outraged honor; no romantic complex let him think it had been. It was merely a pleasant way out of a serious difficulty, an effective means of removing an obstacle that had come between Karl and the success of one of his schemes. Certainly, then, Karl would shoot to kill.

He would take precautions to place his bullet in such a way that his adversary would not readily interfere with him again, at least until after a long period of helplessness in the hospital. To take such deliberate and careful aim took a certain appreciable part of a second—even on the part of one who made dueling his genteel profession—and this fact gave Jeff his chance.

Baron Karl would certainly take time to aim with care. He was probably fully confident of his ability to launch a telling shot in actually less time than his opponent could let fly an aimless one. If Jeff were to live, he must prove that his foe's supposition was not true.

He must shoot fast, but he must shoot straight. He must catch sight of Karl's tall form over his sights in the first movement of his pistol. It was jump-shooting such as now and then he had practiced on deer, in low, warm mountains far away.

The scene might now be moving in the extreme to one who could appreciate its romance and forget its cruelty. The two principals, handsome and stylish figures, stood facing in opposite directions, their pistols held erect. Jeff's good looks were never more appealing, and to Molly, outwardly cold-eyed, watchful, and remorseless, this view of him was almost beyond woman's strength to bear. He was so young, so valiant; even though this was his last second of life his tragic pride still commanded him. No doubt he wanted to play this wicked game according to its best traditions. There was a distant hint of gayety, unthinkably splendid and fine, in his manner; a quaint humor of resignation such as the great have always reached for, a sportiness beyond impeachment. Vain still, with that dear, pathetic vanity of youth, his pose seemed purposely picturesque; one hand resting on his hip, the other, brown in contrast with the turned-back cuff, holding the richly ornamented pistol, his tall form in linen and broadcloth perfectly erect, his fine head held high, his chin lifted from the silken stock. Molly could not forget the signal change that the next second might bring; the courtly form cast down in hopeless ruin, the white, proud face in the dust, the strong hands impotently waving and then lying still, the flashing eyes spending the last of their noble fire in that weird glare which, seen in the eyes of stricken comrades, haunts the dreams of veterans of great wars.

Karl's was a courtly figure too, and something of the certain strength of the man was seen in his hairy hand which, though latently swift as a snake's head, was now steady as iron; in his easy position and confident air. Now he was stark pale for all his Slav darkness of skin; his somber eyes glowed, and the old scar on his cheek looked like a new, red wound. Even if her eyes

were not needed elsewhere, Molly could not look at him, simply because of his obvious confidence of victory. She watched the master of ceremonies, now pale as either of the two principals and evidently seared by an evil lust, and Templeton, who now waited, grave and sedate, yet keenly alive to all sporting aspects of this meeting, safe to one side of his man.

The romantic side of the affair was enhanced by its picturesque setting. As the sun peered up over the hills the land had that happy, radiant look that all early risers know: a look of exultant welcome akin to that seen on the countryside in spring; and for the moment the dark presence of the spruce could be forgotten. Long shadows, like bars, lay across the glade. The frosted leaves of the underbrush in the forest beyond were spotted with ominous red. There was no hint or suggestion of sound on the whole hillside.

Staritsa spoke in that deep hush, and the men quivered and their hands moved on their weapons. "I will count three—in English—and when I command you 'Fire' you are to turn and seek your satisfaction. Get ready! One!"

"Two!" The pause between the numbers was silent beyond thought.

"Three!"

"Fire!"

At that word, both men whirled. The eyes of each, drawn in and intent, saw the other's face as if in a calcium light, in this little flash of an instant before the first pistol spoke. Jeff's face seemed hardly his own, so drawn it was by the fury of his purpose. Every line on Karl's Slavic countenance showed supreme confidence as to the conflict's outcome; and a leer of contempt was on his lips.

When Molly saw that look she knew that Jeff had been put upon and cheated. It was incompatible with human frailty that Karl could face a chance of death with such an air. Jeff saw the look too, knowing instantly by means of those keen perceptions that come to men in the ultimate crisis, that an evil plot had been made against his life; but further than that, there was no time to know. There was no time for terror, nor even for regret that he had not guessed the truth before. There was no time left except for playing out this iniquitous game to its inevitable end.

He saw Karl's tall body over the pistol barrel. At this deadly range—only a few paces—there was no need of careful aiming. Just as he had been

taught to do in shooting swiftly moving game in his Southern hills, he pressed the trigger before the pistol hardly came to rest.

There was a single, sharp report. The look on Karl's face was now one of vast incredulity, grotesque and terrible through the smoke of Jeff's pistol. Then with a mighty effort—ghastly and evil as the snapping of a dying animal—he took desperate aim with his pistol and pulled the trigger.

All of them heard the hammer snap harmlessly against the breach. Then the only sound was the subdued impact of Karl's body on the soft earth.

XXIII

THE moment immediately following Karl's fall was marked by various incidents mostly lost on Jeff, standing as if in a dream with the last filaments of smoke streaming up from his silent pistol. He saw the surgeon rush to Karl's side and begin to administer first aid; he saw Templeton kneel beside his man, then, evidently realizing he could not aid the physician, pick up Karl's revolver from beside the fallen duelist and, oblivious to Staritsa's shouts, begin to examine it. He saw Staritsa attempting to take it from the Englishman's hands, an effort that met with small success; and finally, the most moving sight of all, he saw Molly coming toward him, ready to stand at his side during all the stress that this fierce moment might bring to pass.

He glanced at her, saw that she was stark white with terror but evidently able to hold up, then turned his eyes toward Karl's two friends. Torn though he was by the dread crisis of the second before, his eyes now held a notable intentness, a vigilance never wavering. He was perfectly aware that the business of this October morning might not yet be complete; and that the time had not yet come to rest.

He saw Templeton cock the pistol, point it in the air, and attempt to fire it; and again the hammer clanged impotently down. His next act was to examine the small percussion cap; and his face showed considerable enlightenment when finally he turned his ear to Staritsa's clamor.

The latter had first talked in excited Russian, but now remembering Templeton could not understand this tongue, he once more attempted English. "It is a cheat!" he was crying. "It is a plot—he and his second have killed Karl by a trap! Give me that gun, Templeton! He shall pay for that wickedness with his life!"

"It wouldn't be quite the thing, Staritsa," Templeton answered. "Your free ways aren't quite the thing, out here. There has been cheating somewhere, certainly, but it will have to be taken up through the Governor —"

"We shall make him squirm for this! His second must have replaced the good cap with a defective one while the guns were in their case."

"On the contrary, I should say you merely got the pistols mixed up, through your own stupidity," Jeff observed. "Certainly there was cheating—

and our friend was simply hoisted by his own petard!”

“We will have to go into it further,” Templeton told him. “The cap I have in my pocket contains no powder, and it looks to me as if it had been deliberately taken out. However, Staritsa, I believe we must declare Karl’s honor satisfied, providing that conspiracy can not be proved against the opposite party. Even if the cap had been good, the outcome would have been the same, as far as my man is concerned. Mr. Sharp, you remember, was able to send in his shot before Baron Karl found his aim.”

The full meaning of these words was not lost on either Molly or Jeff. They showed a certain amazing trait of English character. This Templeton’s very profession was that of unscrupulous intrigue. He was more or less of a free lance—not an uncommon type in the older diplomacy—and he was open to any kind of engagement short of actual murder which would offer sufficient remuneration. Yet he retained, far down in an enfeebled conscience, a distinct sporting sense. Perfectly aware that this duel had been forced on Jeff, and doubtless a participant in the spoils that were to accrue therefrom, yet he had kept the letter if not the spirit of the old code of dueling.

Interest now fastened on the injured man. The ball had passed into his left side, but it had missed the vital organs, and Doctor Stevock announced there was at least an even chance for the man’s recovery. He would not, however, care to resume the duel at once. Templeton went to procure a stretcher and men; and nothing remained now for Jeff and Molly but to return to the ship.

Captain Skinner was an eager listener to the tale that was told on the deck that morning.

“Why didn’t you let me come along!” he cried in a tone of sincere reproach. “Why do you leave me out on all these fine mix-ups you and Molly get into? I wasn’t with you when you fit the Roosian triplets, and I wasn’t with you this morning.”

“This was sort of an affair of honor,” Jeff explained. “We couldn’t invite our friends, as if it were a marriage or a funeral.”

“It came near being a funeral—if you hadn’t got hold of the loaded gun. I hope it turns out one for Karl; I’ll go with pleasure and cheer when they bring him down the aisle, the son of a whelp! I can’t see how you figure out it’s a sporting affair. It looks like just plain murder to me.”

“Of course Staritsa got the pistols mixed up.”

“Maybe he did, but it don’t seem reasonable, somehow. Anyway, you got the pistol that was meant for Karl. Well, there’s one thing you can be sure of. This isn’t the end of the mess.”

“I wish I could believe it was.”

“You needn’t try. They’ll spring something else soon. I only wish I didn’t have those sour-faced Muscovites on board; we’d get our plant together somehow and tear out.” He smacked a big fist into his palm. “By Judas, I believe I’ll get a chance to use this old meat-ax yet, in a week or so!”

It turned out that Captain Skinner was all too generous as to time. According to the best traditions of the imperial system, delays of a week or two are strictly out of order and indecorous when profitable business is afoot, though months and years are soon enough to tend to some peasant’s welfare. It was not to be, however, that Skinner should have an immediate chance to work the stiffness out of his huge, rope-pulling hands. He was not a fool, this Yankee skipper, and in his highly colored lifetime he had learned a certain discrimination between bravery and rashness. He could usually recognize an occasion to fight, and during such an occasion he was more like a whirling dervish than a staid New Englander, howling over his deck and leaving summary destruction in his wake. He also knew when to look prim and innocent, quieting his foes’ suspicions until such a time as he felt free to act.

It was the Russians’ lead, in this million-ruble game, and not days or weeks, but only hours saw them make the next play. Just before the supper hour four soldiers from the garrison, in command of a Russian corporal, came tramping up the gangplank. They were not merely a detail of the guard. Walking behind them came Yanovisk, the Governor’s secretary, and he bore in his hand an important-looking document bearing the seal of Spaskii, the Czar’s commissioner.

The soldiers were halted, and Yanovisk made a short speech. “I am most sorry,” he began. Although still uninformed as to where the play was leading, Jeff paused in his wonderment long enough to give Yanovisk credit for a certain amount of real regret; although the young Russian would not refuse his share of the spoil, he was a decent sort and probably deplored some of the Machiavellian methods practiced on Jeff. “I am most sorry,” he repeated, “to be the bearer of unpleasant tidings, but one must obey commands. Doubtless, it will be a matter of small moment.”

“Go ahead,” Jeff said. “What’s the bad news.”

“Give us the worst,” Skinner urged. Then under his breath to Molly, “These fellows can take longer getting to the point than a New England peddler.”

“I have here a warrant which, by your pardon, I must serve.” Spreading the paper in his hands, he read it first in Russian, then translated it into English. It was addressed to the Commanding Officer of the Garrison of his Majesty’s troops, and it was a warrant for the arrest of “one Jefferson Sharp, on the charge of committing a bloody crime against his majesty’s servant, Baron Karl Pavlof. It charged that said Sharp had conspired against Karl’s life, and through fraud, treachery, and villainy had taken advantage of his opponent in an honorable duel, said fraud, treachery, and villainy resulting in serious injury to said Baron Karl, for which crime or crimes he was to be incarcerated in gaol until such time as he could be tried.”

Yanovisk’s foreign-sounding English offered no chance for a mistake. Far from the protection of the courts of his country, Jeff was to be arrested and confined in prison on what was very plainly a trumped-up charge.

It was not because they failed to realize the gravity of this charge that Skinner and Jeff attempted no resistance. In the first place they guessed that the troops had received certain orders, not written in the warrant, which dealt with this very thing. Even the slightest resistance would be an excuse for a volley from four rifles at close range, a lesson that Jeff would surely take to heart. Should a stray bullet from one of the rifles or from the corporal’s pistol find the brave heart of the Boston captain, it would be a regrettable accident, but accidents can not always be avoided in the enforcement of law. Indeed, both Jeff and Skinner knew that some resistance on their part was just what Baron Karl’s friends were hoping for, since it would pave the way for a prompt and efficacious settlement of a rather troublesome affair.

Beyond this, both knew that resistance was the height of folly, even though they could conquer the half-squad who had come to arrest them and the Russian guards who would promptly leap to their fellows’ defense. The entire garrison could be called if needed.

“You will doubtless be free shortly—very doubtless,” Yanovisk explained. “It is a mere matter of form and most to be deplored. But for the present—”

He glanced toward the corporal of the guard who, standing near, slipped iron bands about Jeff’s wrists, leaving them only a few inches’ play. Captain Skinner stood erect, and curious bright sparks—like the phosphorescence of

which sailors speak, trailing their ships through these Northern seas—whirled in his blue eyes; but his arms hung limp at his side.

“I must say you fellers are taking a chance,” he observed to Yanovisk. “You kind of forget he’s a citizen of United States.”

“His cause will be taken up with the United States authorities, doubtless,” Yanovisk explained. “For the present he will be confined as a—what you say?—precautionary measure; then will be turned over for his own government to deal with.”

“Doubtless—if some accident don’t happen to him first. Accidents happen, you know, Duke. I must say that I wish you’d recall them guards so I can go down and tell the President all about this deal. He’ll settle somebody’s hash for this. How long do you think you’ll keep us here?”

“Not long, surely. The American captain still has repairs to make on his good ship?”

“A couple of weeks’ work, yet. I hope you’ll take off the guards by that time.”

“Perhaps. The matter will be settled to the satisfaction of every one. Now, Miss Forest, and you other gentlemen—I must bid you farewell for the present.” Then in Russian, “Lead off your man, Officer.”

The corporal gave command, and with their prisoner between them, the men marched away. It did not surprise Jeff to be taken to an underground prison dug in the hill on which stood Baronof Castle; he had heard rumors of a dungeon where more important prisoners were confined. Here was a corridor on the stone floor of which the soldiers’ tramping feet rang loud; and here were certain cells so dark that the eye could scarcely make out what they contained.

An iron door was opened and in an instant clanged shut behind him. The sound of tramping feet dimmed and finally disappeared. Except for his bitter thoughts that peopled these dusky cells like ghosts, Jeff was left alone.

XXIV

THE only window in Jeff's cell was but a small, barred aperture higher than his head, and only a glimmer of the dying day came into it. Its walls and floor were of stone, and by straining into the dusk, Jeff could see the one article of furnishing that the cell contained: a wooden cot on which lay two fur robes. It was evident, then, that here was a perfect refuge for one who wished to give himself to meditation.

There was little to distract the mind. The gloom itself was restful, provided one did not strain to penetrate it, an annoyance easily avoided by the simple expedient of closing one's eyes. It tended toward perfect concentration on the part of the thinker. The four walls offered no great diversion, and indeed were so empty and cold and gray that they suggested man's only possible image of infinity; and this, like a rare drug, dulled certain areas of the mind to the excitation of certain others. It was as if Jeff were alone in an otherwise-empty universe, with an infinity of space forever about him: a place of poetic retribution for men who know no better than to think. Here, as in Jeff's cell, they could think eternally in peace. The one piece of furniture in the room was not ornate enough to hold his fancy for very long, and he had firm scruples against devoting too much attention to the fur robes which covered it. They might succeed in distracting him from anything he should set his mind to.

His arms were still chained; and perhaps this fact aided him to concentrate. As he could only move them a few inches apart there was nothing he could do with them to divert his attention from his one simple theme, which now held him like an iron chain itself.

This theme concerned a certain abstract thing that he had heard of all his life, but which he had never given a moment's sober thought. The name of that thing was Liberty—a name he had heard so many times it actually had begun to lack meaning for him. Now he thought of it, he could not remember that he had ever known its real meaning.

He had heard it said, times beyond counting, that he and his friends had fought for the liberty of the South. He knew that part of the ardor that sent the Union arms into the field was a desire to liberate the slaves. In addition to this, he had fought because the National Government threatened institutions which he loved and believed in; and his foes had fought to

uphold a union in which he had lost faith. There was, indeed, a great deal of talk about liberty lately; and all the time he had not known what it meant.

He had been taught to believe, before ever the Civil War shook the land, that America was the “Land of Liberty,” and when he had come to hate the institution of America, he had somehow lost faith in the liberty which was its watch cry. He had thought it an empty name. He had secretly concluded that it didn’t matter; at least his attitude tended to show that conclusion. When some of his comrades-at-arms had tried once more to reconcile themselves to the United States Government—believing that it had qualities worth their loyalty, since it had been decreed they could not have a government of their own, exactly as they wanted it—he had decided to vacate America for good. There had been nothing here worth holding him. He had concluded that the Republican idea—which is only another way of saying the Liberty idea—was not worth retaining. In other words, this thing they called Liberty was not worth staying for.

No wonder, as he sat on the floor in the darkness, his arms confined, that his mind was so busy he was almost unaware of the passing of time.

Jeff Sharp felt that perhaps it would have been better to have done this thinking quite a long time before.

Before he had half exhausted the topic, there came an interruption; and at first he was inclined to resent it. It turned out, however, that the ensuing talk threw even further light on this subject which now had become so interesting to him. He had a visitor in the person of the nobleman Staritsa, and the latter, admitted by the lone guard who stayed in quarters just outside the building, came and talked to him through the barred cell door.

In the end Jeff was actually grateful for the conversation, although he was inclined to doubt if it were aimed to please.

“You look very pretty in there,” Staritsa told him, frankly complimentary. Staritsa had been imbibing freely of the Russian national drink, doubtless to drown his sorrow for his friend’s injury, and now a pleasant recklessness was upon him. Dusky though the corridor was, his eyes glowed, and sometimes his white teeth caught the light. “Why do you hold your hands in such a fond way? Have you forgotten the Christian teaching, ‘Let not thy right hand know what thy left hand doeth?’ Here you sit with them within an inch or so of each other. I fear, Mr. Sharp, that position might prove awkward if you tried to duplicate this morning’s feat. You were most clever—to spike Baron Karl’s guns.”

Jeff looked up, but no anger was in his eyes, and he was merely interested in what Staritsa would tell him next. He felt that he would like to draw further confidences from the young noble. "They are somewhat awkward this way, I fear," he observed carelessly, "yet I think I could pick up a dog—not an honest dog, but a cur, a fawning, treacherous wolf whelp—such a dog I could pick up by the scruff of the neck and beat out his brains against these bars. If you care to ask the jailer to let you in—"

Staritsa tried to laugh; but it is part of the curse that lies upon such men that laughter is forbidden. He could only make mirthless sounds, mostly in profane Russian—a tongue that lends itself to the most unspeakable profanity. "*That* will be added to the rest that we owe you," Staritsa said, when he could think again in English. "You were clever to change the guns, Sharp, but I don't think you will be successful in changing the whips. We have had one kind for many centuries, and although we love to comply with a great American's wish, I fear we will be unable to change it for any other. You will get to know all its fine points—over there."

He jerked his hand toward the west.

"Over there, of course," Jeff agreed, smiling. "If I am sent there—there will only be more dogs to kill when the final settlement is made."

"My friend, no one will ever know where you are." Staritsa's tone was serious now; evidently the system he was about to describe moved him to the most fervent admiration. "Perhaps you noticed—to-day—the *Neva II*, lying in the harbor. Perhaps you did not know she is sailing to-night, out west. She will have aboard her certain exiles for the prisons—out there where the sun sets—or rather where it never rises. Certain native thieves, a murderer or two—and perhaps a few others.

"The warrant arresting you to-day said that you were to have a trial; Baron Karl never made a better joke. Injured though he is, he ordered that warrant. Little brother, you have already had your trial. You have already been sentenced. All that remains now—is to give you your number."

"So I am to sail to-night, am I?" Jeff asked. His voice trembled ever so slightly, and Staritsa rejoiced to listen.

"All track of you will be lost. When you lie buried, you will also wear a number—but that time will not be soon. Oh, not at all soon. There will be years and years. The life out there is very healthy, so they tell me.

"Soon the American Government will start inquiries as to what has happened to the Special Correspondent. They will write to the Czar, and the

Czar will not know. Believe me, I am telling the truth; the Czar will not know. There are many things that he does not know. He will be greatly disturbed, but he will not find you. He can not disbelieve the account that will be sent out, and your President will not disbelieve it either. Oh, such a regrettable incident: that Jeff Sharp, summoned before the commissioner for a talk concerning a duel in which he became engaged, disappeared into the forest, evidently afraid for his life, and can not be found! Oh, it will be a great shame—try hard as we could, he could not be found. Of course no one will think of looking Out There. If they did look, after certain years, they would never recognize the grand American diplomat. Why, he was tall, beautiful, and proud. That thing? That shrieking, stooped creature, licking the boots of the guard? That broken, detested thing? Why, that is not a man at all!”

Staritsa shook with glee in the corridor. Jeff had never seen such spite as this with which the noble Muscovite described his victim’s fate. Evidently his love for Baron Karl had been an emotion of great power. Besides, the evil jinni that lives in the vodka jar had hold of him and put ideas in his head.

There was no hope, however, that the plan Staritsa had described was but a drunken phantasy. Jeff knew that the *Neva II* was lying in the harbor, and he knew that she sailed to-night. He was a disilluminated man, at last; and he had abjured false hope for good and all. To-night he was going west.

When the *Neva II* passed the harbor mouth he might say farewell to American shores—except perhaps dim glimpses from shipboard of the bleak peninsula, like the Siberian shore itself—because he would not come again. Such prisoners as he would be do not return to make trouble. His plan to migrate from America was to be executed.

He would get his wish, after all. He would become the subject of a monarch, rather than one of a governing people. He would spend the rest of his days in a country ruled by a privileged aristocracy, just the sort of a *régime* he had favored. Fate has queer ways of making one’s dreams come true.

He had renounced America, and some power which lived behind the clouds had taken him at his word. In the long years to come he would have chances in plenty to observe the virtues of an aristocracy over a republic. He would have unparalleled opportunities to observe its fine points, and to admire its system.

In America he had been one of the commonwealth, but he had wished to give over his rights as a citizen to become a vassal of a monarch. He would now get his wish, and it was part of his requital that in surrendering up his title as a freeman, he would also surrender his title as an individual, his name. He would be known by a number from henceforth. But likely he would soon forget his name, anyway. Such a life as would be his in a Siberian prison camp works amazing changes in a man, and particularly it devastates the association areas of the brain. This was apart from the fact that he would be one of an ant hill, in a land whose empty spaces were in themselves enough to despoil a man of his own identity.

Jeff Sharp had drained his cup to its bitter dregs. Now, as if his cup were poison, the stream of his life seemed to have ceased to flow. So silent he stood, seemingly so bereft of all motion that he suggested a wild thing crouching terrified in a woodland covert, who by remaining motionless hopes to escape the searching eyes of a beast of prey; but the cruel beast that hunted Jeff to-night was his own thoughts. He was alone, at last; wholly and terribly alone.

There was no one to go to now. Iron bars stood between. There was no one who could come to him. He had danced, but now the music was still and his companions had gone away, and he was left alone in the silence and the darkness. As far as Jeff dared to dream his game of life had been played—and lost.

If his punishment stopped at this instant, Jeff Sharp had paid in full for all his vanity and folly; yet it had hardly begun. Those who hated him and who wanted to see him fall now had their wish. Here, in the darkness, out of the sight of all men, his proud head was bowed.

He was alone in fact as well as in the lonely sea of his mood; Staritsa had reeled through the corridor and away into the twilight. The dusk deepened, and the black Alaskan night obliterated the last ray that wandered through the window of his cell. Still Jeff stood in one place, and the wheel of his thought was far and wide as the orbit of a star; but the shadows that lay over him were black and chill with never a starry gleam.

XXV

JEFF could not remain thus for long. The tide is never still, but dropping to its lowest level, immediately begins to rise again. There is no motionless body in heaven and earth, and quiescence is intolerable to the moving spirit of the universe. If it were true that his hopes could not fall lower, they must certainly rise according to the changeless laws of change. Three hours after nightfall marked the slack tide.

Jeff at first was not interested in the voice that he heard so dimly at the head of the stone steps that led down to the corridor. Perhaps Staritsa was coming to talk to him again, more likely it was merely the conversation of some of the Governor's guests walking in the gardens. The language used was unknown to him; and at first the sound did not arrest his brooding thoughts. But presently he started, and his eyes opened wide.

He had heard a familiar voice. It was a girl's voice, like a low-murmuring stream and full of marvelous, gliding tones. He had often heard it sound plaintive and appealing, but now, although it was subdued, it was charged full of a bewitching coquetry such as he had never imagined it could possess. At intervals a man answered her, rather grimly but with rough familiarity and, unmistakable in his tone, a certain gruff humor.

They spoke in a tongue he did not understand, and although he did not discern a single familiar word, the larger import of the conversation was not lost on him. The girl was employing all her feminine arts to win some favor from his jailer. She was bewitching him with her voice, charming him with the sheer music of her tones; and there was a suggestiveness, an invitation all but veiled in her manner to which Jeff, waiting in the darkness below, was keenly conscious. This girl knew how to appeal to men. There was nothing coarse or obvious about her coquetry; it was the kind which men regard as unconscious, and which is therefore all the more flattering.

With the possible exception of the night of the Governor's dance, he had never heard her speak in this tone before; yet now that he heard her distinctly he could not for an instant question her identity. This was Molly, of course. Even in his moment of deepest despair he might have known she would come.

Again she had proved to him her linguistic skill, in that she made herself easily understood to the jailer. What was their common language he did not know, but he assumed it was some coastwise jargon she had picked up while traveling with her uncle. Evidently her purely feminine language was likewise lucid to him, because she soon won her plea. His tone indicated hesitating compliance with some request on the girl's part. Jeff's guess was immediately confirmed by the rattle of a latch on the prison door and the tramp of feet on the stone steps. Beams from a lantern leaped about in the corridor, casting, running, chasing shadows on the walls.

The yellow light showed two visitors beside the jailer. One was Molly, of course—she who had never failed him. Jeff saw with mounting hope that the other was the barrel-chested, unrefined old Yankee skipper, Captain Skinner.

It was plain now that the girl's charm had not been the only *sesame*. She had had substantial aid in the shape of a prime sea otter skin which the jailer now carried under his arm, the luster and beauty of which was almost past imagining, as the lantern beams glided over the quivering, shimmering fur. It was evidently an argument hard to answer.

"Impress it on him that piece of fur is a high price just for a farewell word to Jeff," Captain Skinner told the girl in English, as he paused in front of the cell. "It'll pay off his debt and get him back to Russia."

The girl repeated Skinner's message; then turning, talked through the bars to the prisoner. Instead of speaking English, which Jeff had every reason to expect she would do, she spoke in a tongue unknown to him, evidently the same language with which she had addressed his keeper; and at first he could conceive of no possible explanation for her strange conduct. Yet in a moment he guessed the incredible truth. It was plain now that this message-bearing was a ruse, and that she was repeating unimportant tidings purely for the keeper's benefit and to quiet his suspicions. Evidently this midnight visit had another theme.

He nodded, pretending that he understood. The girl smiled, then turning, spoke again to the jailer, and resting her white arm on the sleeve of his uniform, drew him up beside her. Jeff's eyes were not shadow-filled now, and they glittered in the beams of the lantern that was now held close to the bars. Obviously Molly had requested the jailer to throw his light on the prisoner's face—asking, probably, for a last clear view of him before they parted—and urged by her moving touch, he had not been able to refuse. Now on pretense of getting the light nearer, she reached, thrilled him with

the touch of her hand on his, and gently took the lantern from him. Just for an instant she held it so that it shone on Jeff's face.

Then without warning, with a motion swift as bird's flight, she dashed the lantern against the bars of the cell.

Jeff was only aware of a swift trail of light, a sudden bright flicker that showed the whole scene in minute detail, and then overwhelming darkness.

In that final glimpse Jeff had discerned certain things of considerable moment to him. He saw first the look of grotesque amazement on the jailer's face; evidently this lantern-breaking was not in the bargain he made. In the same glance he saw that Captain Skinner's wish had come true, and he was getting into action at last. In the final gleam before the darkness obliterated everything he saw the old skipper with outspread arms, come diving through the air.

The darkness that dropped down was absolutely blinding; and only such sound as reached him through the bars conveyed to Jeff what was taking place in the corridor. He heard the distinct impact of Skinner's head against the jailer's back, and the thud of their bodies on the floor. These sounds were all but obscured by a queer gobbling sound, largely unintelligible except that it was not unlike the utterances heard when human breathing is summarily shut off. This was followed by other noises that might have been made by struggling bodies rolling about the floor and against the walls.

It was a strange sensation to Jeff to stand helpless behind the bars in the presence of an unseen battle. This was the kind of thing that reacts violently on human nerves. He was glad when the more heavy sounds abruptly ceased, and the corridor lay in silence except for the subdued whisper of troubled breathing. A moment later he heard the scratch of a matchhead against the wall, followed by its soft explosion as it ignited.

Molly had scratched that match, and she had not broken it in the attempt. Neither did she have to scratch it twice, and so firm was her hand that it burned with a candle's steady flame. Thus the fact that her face was stark white did not seem to argue scattered faculties. Presumably oblivious to the scene about her she now lighted the lantern, holding it high and touching the little torch to its wick.

The jailer was at present lying prone in the corridor; and his usefulness had for the time being departed wholly. He was plainly unconscious, and furthermore he was now being confined against such time as he should waken. Captain Skinner had produced cords from his pockets—indicating that this enterprise had been worked out in considerable detail—and he not

only bound the man's hands and feet, but also tied a handkerchief in his mouth. Skinner was a sailor, used to handling ropes, so it seemed likely that the work was thoroughly and satisfactorily done.

The skipper's next act was to unhook the key ring from the fallen jailer's belt and unlock Jeff's cell. "Get a jump on," he cautioned the late prisoner. They put out the light, took the steps of the corridor two at a time, and glided through the darkened gardens. "We've got to get back to the ship before that bloody guard-mount."

Jeff did not understand fully, but he paused not at all to ask questions. Still with his arms bound behind him he followed his friends through the shadows and on to the deck of the ship. And now it became apparent that this night's activities had not in the least been confined to the prison, and that the main business of the evening had occurred on the ship itself.

As soon as Jeff stepped aboard he detected a pleasant rumble in the bowels of the ship which had great meaning for him; and he noticed also that the ship quivered slightly in its place at the quay. At first he saw no signs of the guards, but on the way down to the engine room in search of tools to break his bonds, he encountered all four of them lying side by side in a passage. They moved their eyes toward him as he walked by, but they did not speak. The practiced skill with which Captain Skinner had pinioned the unfortunate jailer could not be misunderstood.

As the mess boy filed at his wristlets, Jeff was told the larger aspects of the night's work. The ship had been put in running order in record time, and it was plain that Captain Skinner had purposely deceived Yanovisk when he had told him, the preceding afternoon, that repair work would last a fortnight. In reality there had been very little to do; but he had thus put the Russian off his guard. Now the giant of steam thundered in the boilers. Led by Captain Skinner, the crew had procured all the armament aboard, made a concerted attack on the guard, disarmed them in silence, and stored them below for safe-keeping.

Even now, Captain Skinner was on the bridge, calling down commands to his men. The gang was taken in, the screw churned the waters, and the ship moved grandly out to sea.

XXVI

THROUGH the long hours of that chill, October night Captain Skinner drove his vessel down the island shore and south and east into the Inside Passage. Here only power vessels could follow him, and he had the best chance to avoid pursuit in the maze of islands. He was making for an American port, there to turn over his furs, the runaway prisoner, and the Russian guardsmen to the strong arms of Uncle Sam. It now seemed likely that Jeff would be as glad to return to home shores as he had been to leave them.

Captain Skinner was taxing his engines, hoping to gain such a head start on the Company ships, which were sure to follow, that he could not be overtaken. No wonder the slow dawn found him standing on the bridge, looking down his long wake through a glass.

A tiny gray cloud hung motionless just at the further curve of the earth, and this he watched for a long time. To most eyes it would have been almost invisible; to any eye but one trained by the sea it would have had no definite meaning. Captain Skinner, however, understood only too well. He left his post and gave certain orders to the boatswain. Then he went into his cabin where Jeff and Molly were waiting.

His determined look stopped their talk and instantly fastened their attention. "The *Resanof* is after us," he told them simply.

"The fastest boat in the Company's fleet!"

"Yes. Their flagship. Fitted out with Whitworth and Armstrong guns. She has half a knot on us in speed, on inside waters. That means she'll overtake us sometime to-night."

Jeff got up, and his head all but touched the cabin ceiling. He paused to smile into the girl's white face. "I expected nothing else," he said, rather quietly. He had learned a great self-discipline in these last days. "I suppose you aren't very much surprised, either, Captain."

"I thought maybe something like this would happen, sure enough. We could have skinned all hollow the other Russian ships. The *Resanof* wasn't in the harbor when we left; I guess she came in since."

“Sure. And she’s already overtaking us.” Once more he smiled to reassure the heartsick girl, at the same time wondering that one of her basic strength should ever need his reassurance. He remembered how she had reacted to every crisis they had met together, and he knew now, that when this affair reached its inevitable climax, she would be one to lean on rather than to support. “Cap’n, there is only one possible course.”

“What is that?”

“Give ’em the furs. It may be, if we let them have ’em, they won’t try to take me.”

“But they will take you, anyway,” the girl cried. “Don’t you see they will? They’ll be afraid that you’ll make trouble for them through the government if they let you get away. That is the system, Jeff; you will be taken where there’s no chance of you making trouble for any one.”

“Give up the furs,” Jeff repeated, “and if we can’t get out of it, I’ll go back with them.”

The man from North Carolina was not posing. He was in earnest, and he wished to be taken so. He had not conquered fear—fear is as much a part of the world as sunshine or rain or any other of nature’s devices—but he had declared what seemed to him the only possible thing to do, the only decent course for him to follow. Accompanying his new maturity a redundant decency had lately come upon him, and was now an imperious instinct. Facing Siberian exile was no easier than facing death whose look must ever humble the stoutest heart, but in these adventurous times there were several things that mattered more.

“We haven’t a chance on earth to fight, and you know it,” he went on. “They can stand off and hammer us to pieces with those long-range Armstrongs. It just means sacrificing you and the lives of half the men aboard, without saving me. The thing to do is to let ’em take me, if we can’t bribe them out of it. Then you go on to Washington and do all you can to get me free.”

“You might be dead before then,” Skinner answered. “Just the same, you told the truth when you said there was no use trying to fight. I don’t intend to fight. I’ve got another scheme—the only possible scheme under the circumstances. Jeff, we have to let you off.”

“Of course. I should have thought of that.”

“About noon we’ll turn into the passage back of Upreanof Island—beyond Frederick Sound. Here is deep water and quiet, and we’ll put you off

opposite the mouth of the Stikine River, in that native skin-boat we've got aft. It's light and handy as a canoe, and I've told the bo'sun to fill it up with a winter's supplies—flour, rice, and other necessities. You will have a rifle and plenty of shells for taking your meat, a few tools, a light camp outfit, and a wolf-skin robe. You should cross the flats into the Stikine, and paddle or line your way up the river as far as you think best, then go up some little tributary and make a camp. I don't think they'll ever find you; they won't see you get off, and when they overtake us and find we haven't got you aboard, I think they'll just take the skins and never trouble to look for you. If they did look for you, they wouldn't know where to find you, because they wouldn't know at what point along these hundreds of miles of island and mainland shores we let you off.

"This scheme'll give you your best chance. Of course, your skins are goners—unless a miracle happens—but, at least, you'll get away. I guess you won't feel bad about them skins if you save your own skin, and that's what it'll amount to. You'll make out somehow for the winter, and meanwhile I'll go below and state your case to the President. When we come up to look for you, we'll come in a gunboat."

Molly got up and now stood beside Jeff. "It's the only thing, of course," she told them. Then, turning with a mysterious look to Captain Skinner, "Uncle Dave, are you sure the men are putting in plenty of supplies?"

"Sure. Enough to carry one person over the winter."

"There isn't going to be one person. There are going to be two." Her face flamed; they saw its light beyond that of the dawn; and she lifted her arms in a noble gesture. "Oh, do you think I can let him go alone!"

To Jeff Sharp, lost in his wondering thoughts, this was simply destiny. Somehow he knew, as well as she, that he could not go alone. There was no known reason why; it had just been ordained. He was pale, but his eyes glowed like lanterns; and he sensed the inexorable movement of events.

"After all I've been through with him, do you think I could let him go alone?" she asked, turning first to one and then to the other. Her voice broke, and she sobbed and laughed in the same breath. "Am I to be thrown out like ballast? Besides—who would take care of him, if not me? Uncle Dave, he can hardly find his own clothes, much less find his way in the woods. Oh, of course I am going with him."

The Captain eyed her, but he did not attempt to dissuade her. He had wisdom even beyond that of his long years. He glanced once at Jeff, smiled wanly at his bewildered look, and turned toward the door. "Yes, ma'am," he

replied, in a tone that Jeff had never heard on his lips before. Plainly it was something learned long ago and which had lingered in his body until this hour when it should again be fitting. In it was that assurance of strict obedience that was still the tradition of the sea. Skinner was not speaking as a master now, but as a seaman to his officer. "I'll see about it right away."

He turned and left the two together. Perhaps he was glad to escape from a scene in which his presence would only be an unnecessary complication. Jeff still seemed unaware of her.

She glanced covertly into his face, and at last she stood before him and touched his arm. "You are not angry with me, Jeff, for being so forward?" she asked, her voice low as distant bells. "You know I have to play this thing through with you to the end, now I've started, and I could have waited forever and you wouldn't have asked me to go."

"I couldn't ask you—to take such a risk—for me."

"I know you thought you couldn't. That is why I had to ask myself. You couldn't go alone, Jeff; you always must have some one to take care of you. It was either a case of speaking or staying here on the ship while you dropped off, and that couldn't be. Jeff, the girls you like aren't so bold, and they let you take care of them instead of taking care of you, but just the same I couldn't hold back. You won't hold it against me, will you?"

"My God, Molly!" he cried fervently. "How could I hold anything against you? You've been my guardian angel, all the way through."

"Just the same, I know how you regard me." A dim smile lighted her tender lips. "We'll be getting off, then—together."

"Yes." Their eyes met with no evasion. "It's a blessing I never deserved."

This was not just polite talk. He had told many chivalrous lies, in his short days, and many times he had concealed his true thoughts from this girl who now strained to read his every glance; but for once Jeff Sharp was speaking from his heart. In his hour of deepest humility he had received the highest honor ever paid him; and although he could not begin to understand, at least he was ready to kneel at her feet in gratitude.

She slipped away to make a few preparations; joining Jeff before noon on the deck. The boat of tough leather was loaded almost to the gunwales, now, and the ship was drifting to a slow stop. When at last it floated easily on the tide the bidarka was lowered, and the two stood ready to climb down into it.

“Good-by, you two children,” Captain Skinner told them. The familiar grin was gone from his weather-beaten face; and some nobleness upon it—still veiled from Jeff’s eyes—called forth Molly’s honored and honoring tears. “Take care of yourselves.”

“We’ll try to,” Molly replied with her old warm, wistful humor. “I don’t see how you’re going to run the ship without me.”

But Jeff was in no mood for gayety, even though the laughter came through tears. “I’ll take care of her,” he promised Captain Skinner. “I just want to tell you this—”

“Yes—”

“She will help me more than I can help her, but I want to tell you that no harm—of any kind—will come to her while she is in my charge. Much of the old South is lost, Captain Skinner. Much is gone, never to bless us again. But there’s one thing that is left—at least it is still an ideal with us. It is—honor to womanhood! Your niece will be safe in my care.”

The master shook Jeff’s eager hand. “I know she will,” he assured him. Then, because this scene was getting beyond him, he added slyly, “I’m not worried about *that* gal.”

“Then good-by, Cap’n!” said Jeff. The girl echoed the parting word.

“Good-by—and don’t worry about me not coming back to look for you. You won’t, will you?”

“No,” Jeff told him earnestly. “We know you’ll help us all you can.”

“We Americans have got to help one another these days, when so many people want to see us fall.”

“Yes.” The man from North Carolina looked him in the eye. “We Americans must look after one another.”

XXVII

INTO the mouth of the broad Stikine the two voyageurs guided their laden bidarka; and it was like starting anew into the river of life. Fugitives though they were, they meant to make the best of this canoe-adventure, reconcile themselves to its hardships, and take all that uncertain pleasure which is to be derived from close communion with raw, robust nature. At least this free journeying through pleasant water vistas was more pleasant than pacing a darkened cell.

Both knew something about handling a canoe, but since Molly seemed to be the most skilled, she took the stern seat. When the river flowed quietly, they made their way by paddling; but a large part of the way the boat was “lined” up the bank—the two voyageurs walking along the water’s edge and pulling the bidarka by means of a rope fastened at bow and stern. When night lowered they pushed just far enough into the heavy timber to hide their supper fire, beside which they made a primitive camp.

Almost after the first hour they were in the deep wilderness. They saw no other living things but the wild creatures in the water and on the bank; hair seal and waterfowl, fur-bearer and big game. On the frowning cliffs of nearby mountains the flocks of wild goats looked like minute patches of last winter’s snow; and often a surly, peevish, sulky old grizzly, fishing on the bank, looked at them with sullen eyes, no doubt resenting their intrusion into his fastnesses. Once they glimpsed that scientific curiosity, the glacier bear, and although they had scarcely reached the edge of the moose country, they met on the fourth day out an old cow moose that was also a voyageur—swimming staunchly on some adventure across the wide river. This was the “backwoods” of which Jeff had often spoken with contempt—but that was before he had met them face to face. He would never scorn them hereafter. Before the end of the first day he learned that, compared to them, his proud strength was less than a leaf that the wind ravishes and hurls down.

This was the spruce forest, unbroken except for its waters and the heights of snowy ranges. Here were wonders past any man’s imagining: gentleness, and at the same time, savagery; deep peace, and in the same breath, the realization of never-ending war; desolation and eternal hospitality. He saw scenes of moving beauty: glaciers, cataracts, sequestered lakes, snowy peaks dreaming in the sun, hidden sloughs flashed over by

wings of mallard and brant, rivulets creeping through ferns, a wooded sky line between him and a rising moon.

He tasted of the hardships of the trail, the rough life that is the only possible life in the wilderness. After paddling or pulling all day he knew what it was to make camp in the gray, bleak twilight: building fires, cutting fuel, spreading their canvas fly that was all they had in the way of a tent. He ate the rough food, much of it poorly cooked over the camp fire; laborer's food, he thought it was, yet sustaining him in his toil and satisfying his strengthening body. When they made their permanent winter's camp, almost a hundred miles up the river and a half mile back from its shore on the bank of a small stream, he knew the arduous labor of cabin-building.

Molly helped him a great deal, but the heavy work naturally fell to his greater strength. He had to cut trees and float the logs down the creek to the selected site, haul them out on the bank beyond high-water line, then lift them into place. He made many mistakes, he was awkward from sheer inexperience, and the work which an experienced woodsman could have done in three days took him almost a fortnight. He had to hunt meat—the caribou and moose that thronged these more open forests back from the coast line—packing it on his back into camp; and to lay in fuel for the Northern winter which was surely encroaching upon them.

There was nothing extraordinary about this toil. All frontiersmen were obliged to perform the same arduous tasks, and in addition clear the land for corn and run their trap lines into the forest. Yet it was all wonderfully enlightening to Jeff Sharp. By just such labor and hardship the steel of America had been forged.

He had always before taken America for granted. If he had thought about it at all, he assumed it had “just happened”; and the fact that it had been hewn out of the wilderness by his own forefathers had never occurred to him. He had never regarded America as a priceless heritage, won through just such mighty toil as he was doing now. Women and lords could pamper a culture, but by God! it took men to make a nation.

Trying though they sometimes were, these days in the wildwood were good for Jeff. From this far place he seemed to get a perspective on all of life; and his standards underwent revolutionary change. Things mattered deeply that before were as nothing; and many things he once set store by were now as dust. He did not believe he would continue to deplore the absence of a vested nobility in America. Nobility, meaning exalted birth, would not count for much out here, when there were trees to fell and logs to

lift and cabins to build. It was even possible that the nation governed by and for a hardy, industrious, adventurous rank and file was in some ways to be preferred to that where a cultured aristocracy sat comfortably on the necks of crushed and hopeless peasantry. It was a revolutionary thought, yet it haunted his meditative hours.

He had never been proud of America. It was a backwoods nation, and even its oldest cities were but yesterday the haunts of wolf and deer. The mighty, marching spirit that had made America was shut from his sight; and thus he had not been inclined to appreciate the victories it had won. Now that he had cut a few trees himself he experienced a healthy wonder at the vast areas newly cleared and sown to grain. He made at last a surprising discovery: that America was rich and great purely because her eagle's brood had made her so.

Perhaps such a land was worth a man's loyalty, its ideals worth fighting for. Perhaps the brave and warlike people whose fortitude and daring had made it possible were worthy of his respect, even more than cultured lords and ladies far away. Since it had been ordained that the Union should stand and that the Southern people were not to establish a government exactly to fill their needs, perhaps the country as a whole could still be worth his allegiance. Perhaps one should feel pride in the mere fact of being an American, a representative of America's strong and marching citizenry.

He found himself regarding Molly in a new light. He no longer patronized her, nor did he measure her by any scale other than that of intrinsic worth. She had served him a long time, but now the hour of reckoning was at hand. Fully appreciative at last of all she had done for him, he soberly concluded that it was now his time to serve, and this he did to the limit of his power.

He was willing to work his fingers to the bone to add to Molly's comfort, meanwhile trying to save her all except the more pleasant tasks. He spared no pains to make the cabin comfortable for her, and in every way to prepare for the rigorous winter which was encroaching so swiftly upon them. He maintained a constant attitude of cheer so that she might be cheered, and his unvarying consideration and chivalry was actually a wonder—worthy of the best traditions of the South. In these passing weeks he did, indeed, pay some of the debt he owed her in the past, although he was not blind to the fact that her very presence here, beside him in his hour of trial, was an accumulative obligation that never could be fully paid. On one occasion he risked his own life to hold her when she slipped on a steep mountain side, and all of one chill, rainy, dismal night he spent at her side purely to administer to a

vicious, raging toothache for which no soothing drugs could be found short of Sitka. His tenderness that night was even more dear to her because it had been called forth by a malady of no lasting seriousness and which was not a traditional occasion for chivalric service.

With the deepening cold and lengthening nights they knew a growing need of mutual service. The Northern wilderness is dreary and dark in the late fall, stricken by the threat of coming winter, and only by a fine, gay companionship could the two exiles escape its brooding mood.

They learned to find manna in the wilderness and to derive certain happiness from their sylvan home. The fear of capture by the Russians was largely past now. Since they had left the *Ethan Allen* they had not so much as glimpsed a human form; and naturally Jeff could hardly believe his eyes when, one chill November morning, he saw unaccustomed traffic on the broad Stikine.

From the bank where he stood gaffing salmon for winter use he distinguished a black, moving speck far up the stream. At first he thought it was a piece of driftwood—perhaps a tree top such as often floated by like a green-sailed ship—but flotsam does not hasten toward the sea with the aid of flashing paddles. Peering intently, Jeff saw it was a canoe manned by a single voyageur; and without waiting for further scrutiny, he scrambled up the bank behind screening thickets.

A wild animal could have scarcely found cover more quickly. Even in his few weeks here he had picked up something of that strange furtiveness that marks all denizens of the hushed woods, a power to drift away like smoke into the maze of light and shadow of the underbrush. Now he lingered out of sight, watching intently.

The voyageur was plainly an Indian. White men do not as a rule race the salmon down the riffles with such slight effort; besides, his skin showed bronze against the long blue sheen behind. Following the deepest part of the channel the boat swung in and approached within fifty feet of him. And now Jeff recognized the brown, aquiline face past any possibility of doubt.

“Big Eagle!” he called suddenly. And he stepped out on to the bank so that the man could see him plainly.

Big Eagle started and whirled, but he did not snatch up his musket. He knew perfectly that the voice from the shore was not that of an enemy, simply because it issued from human vocal chords instead of from the maw of a gun. He had offered a good target, and it was the way of his foes to

shoot first and speak afterward. He saw Jeff, and turning his canoe in a swift, graceful circle, he made a skillful landing just at the white man's feet.

"Heap fighter!" the Indian observed eloquently. "Lick'm Roosian soldiers on Kolosh Ryeka trail."

"That's right, Big Eagle! What in the world you doing here?"

But the native was still absorbed in what seemed to him a miraculous meeting. "Big Eagle's friend," said he. "Where big, strong, skookem squaw?"

Jeff grinned. "Molly? She's back at our cabin."

XXVIII

ALTHOUGH the Indians are not usually a demonstrative people, Big Eagle's joy at seeing Molly again was so apparent that it was almost embarrassing. These two had a bond of language; and she at once essayed to find out what chance had brought him here. He spoke briefly at first, but at the girl's eager questions he went into a long explanation of some kind of which Jeff could not understand one word. And now the latter found himself waiting with breathless interest for Molly's translation. Something in her manner indicated that the native's story was of extraordinary import to her.

"This is the strangest thing," the girl told him at last, with shining eyes. "Templeton and Staritsa are up at a Hudson Bay post a long, long way on the river. He's a bit vague as to how far, but he says it is almost a month's journey from here upstream."

"They went up there searching for us?"

"That would be the natural supposition, but Big Eagle says not. He says they weren't searching for him, either—although he has been doing his trading at the same remote post. This is his home country, you remember. He tells me that when he brought in some water furs to sell, the men were at the post, and as soon as he got a glimpse of them he recognized them as two of the men in power at Sitka. He named Staritsa, and described the other as an Englishman, Staritsa's friend, so of course he means Templeton. He thought at first they were in pursuit of him, but when he inquired from his friends, he found they had not even asked about him."

"Did they recognize him?"

"He didn't give them a chance to. He left at once to join his people who have a summer village on the headwaters of the big tributary below—the *Iskut*, I believe they call it."

"Then what was their business up here, if they weren't looking for us or for him either?"

"That's the mystery. Big Eagle says that some men in red coats—English soldiers, of course—and some other big chiefs had come from afar to meet Staritsa and Templeton. They had many horses, and according to the accounts the natives told Big Eagle, they had come a journey of many

moons—as many as Big Eagle has fingers. That doesn't seem reasonable, does it?"

A grim look overspread Jeff's face. "It might easily happen—if they had come across country from Ottawa!"

"He says they brought papers which the Indians understood were of great importance, and these were given to Staritsa and Templeton to carry back to Sitka. He said the parley was almost completed when he got there; and the men in the red coats were getting ready to start back—overland."

"I suppose up the headwaters of the Stikine and across country to Ottawa. Staritsa and Templeton must be on the way home too—only a short distance behind Big Eagle."

"I suppose so. Jeff, those two men must have passed here a week or so after we arrived. What do you suppose it means?"

"It is pretty evident what it means, I should say!" Jeff replied. His sparkling eyes showed suppressed excitement. "Molly, ask him how many men from the post Templeton and Staritsa have with them. So much depends on that."

Molly put the question and presently translated the native's answer. "He says only two—one in each canoe. He says further that the other white man was *Templeton*—he remembers he was called that."

"Good. This thing is straightening out pretty well. It is astonishing how much the natives can pick up about white men's business; they are a great deal like our servants down below, finding out more than their masters know themselves. Molly, this man has let us in on a mighty important piece of news."

"What is it?"

"That a certain treaty is going through between England and Russia—or rather between the semi-imperial Hudson's Bay Company and the Russian-American Company. Those men were undoubtedly messengers from high-up government officials in Ottawa, accompanied by soldiers, and Staritsa was sent to meet them as an agent of the Russian-American Company. The business was carried on way out here in the backwoods for—only one possible reason."

"Secrecy?"

"Perhaps, but mainly safety. They wanted to travel in Canadian territory all the way to avoid any risk of being intercepted and their documents taken

away from them—a possibility if they went by way of sea. Of course, they weren't looking for us, or for Big Eagle either. We are small fry compared to this."

"A treaty that concerns—America?" Molly asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"Of course—ultimately. It is of very great concern to America who gets control of the great, northwest end of the continent. That treaty, Molly, will decide the ultimate ownership of Alaska. It was the thing I was sent up here to check."

The girl's eyes opened wide. "And you're too late!" she cried. Her manner indicated that Jeff's affairs were her own. "The treaty has gone through?"

"Molly, I don't think so—yet. Neither Staritsa nor Templeton could possibly have had authority to sign such a document as that would be—one a secret agent, and the other a confederate of Karl without official position. I think likely they were empowered to state the Russian Company's terms, and probably they reached an agreement with the agents of the Hudson's Bay Company, but certainly the document has to go down to Sitka before the deal can be closed. Certainly Karl and Prince Maksoutof will have to sign it, one as part owner of the company and the other as governor of the province; and I wouldn't wonder if it would have to be carried to St. Petersburg." He paused, his thoughts too engrossing to permit speech. "Of course, Karl would have come except for his wound—and if he had?—in that case, I wouldn't feel so sure the deal was not already closed and the treaties signed. Perhaps that bullet I sent into his side will yet make history!"

"It is a renewal of the treaty of 1839, of course," the girl remarked. "I've heard something about it."

"Yes, only more comprehensive in character. Molly, there's no use of my keeping Seward's instructions from you any longer; you have guessed part, and the time has come to tell you the rest. You are sure this native cannot understand English?"

"Not this kind of English. He can't follow you, possibly."

"Good. You know, by the treaty of 1839, the Hudson's Bay Company had leased all south of Cape Spencer on the mainland. This treaty has expired, and in renewing it, undoubtedly the two companies have joined hands for the exploitation of all of Russian-America. It is to be trapped by Hudson's Bay Company's agents, settled by English citizens, and, of course,

the province will soon be an English province by right of settlement. England wants it to complete her American possessions and give her a full sweep on the three oceans. America doesn't want England to have it, for many reasons, one of them England's attitude during the war; and for equally many reasons, wants it and needs it herself. But if that treaty goes through before February first, America won't get it. On that date the Czar will authorize the sale of the province to the United States Government, provided that the Russian-American Company does not renew their charter in the meantime. If the company makes this profitable deal with England, they *will* renew the charter, harsh though it is—and our chance to own Alaska will be gone forever.

“Now, let us suppose what would happen in case that treaty should be intercepted somewhere between the post where it was put in Staritsa's hands, and Sitka—in other words, somewhere on this river. The English officials have already started back overland, and they could not be overtaken. In a very few weeks and possibly days, the winter will close all travel in the mountain regions, at least until the snow is packed. The possibility suggests itself that even if Staritsa and Templeton lost the treaty itself they could go on into Sitka, report in general the terms agreed to, and the Russian Company would get a renewal of their charter with the Czar on the expectation of getting the British to sign up again in the spring. But this would be risky business. Things might look entirely different in the spring, and the Hudson's Bay Company would have Karl and his crowd just where they want him. He would be bound to a charter which would ruin him and the Company too, unless Hudson's Bay Company helped him out. I must admit, however, that Karl might do that very thing: sign up with the idea of rewriting the treaty with Hudson's Bay next spring, provided he is aware of their terms. The only sure way the deal can be blocked would be that Staritsa and Templeton should become snowed in for the winter, and unable to get back to Sitka until after February. In that case, Karl and Maksoutof would have no way of knowing what terms had been agreed to, and they would have to wait till spring to renew their charter with the Czar. The latter, suspicious of Karl and some of his other agents, and wanting to let go of a province he can't protect, will in the meantime sell out to America.

“There will probably be a lot to this agreement which is not down on paper, but which Staritsa carries in his head. That makes it all the more important that he report personally to Karl. I think the terms concern ultimate betrayal of the Czar to England, not to mention other points not meant for the liberal monarch's eyes. Molly, if you and I wanted to do a great thing—perform a service for America that will be appreciated a

hundred years from now—far more than it can be appreciated now, or any time in the near future—we would see to it that the treaty never arrives in Sitka!”

Molly’s eyes spoke as plainly as the ringing words with which she answered him. This was a universal language—the changing, welling light in her eyes—and the dusky Indian grunted, wondering at this white goddess from beyond the forests. “Then what can be your answer?” she asked.

“Wait, Molly. We must see where we stand. We can’t look at the natives’ side of the case: the fact that with England to protect the Russian-American Company against the Czar they will be exploited as they never were before. We can’t look from the Czar’s point of view either—that Karl is undoubtedly planning to betray him. We must only look from America’s side. Are we justified in descending to force to stop that treaty?”

“England didn’t hesitate to commit overt acts against us—when the Union was jeopardized. Privateers fitted out in England didn’t hesitate to stop our ships. Never fear—she knows the game. The British leaders were no friends of ours, Jeff, during the war—with the exception of a few liberals like Gladstone and the Queen herself, and they have to pay for their folly! I don’t think what you propose need rest heavily on your conscience.”

“Everything is fair—in war and diplomacy. A man ought to sacrifice a little of his conscience just as quickly as his life, if great public good will come of it. Besides, it may be we have a personal interest. This affair is of the greatest personal moment to Karl and Staritsa.”

The warm lips in front of him—near enough to touch with his own—set in a hard line. “Yes,” she breathed, “there may be personal debts to pay.”

They brooded awhile on this. Remorse showed no more in Molly’s lovely face between the two flaxen braids that came down over her breasts than in the bronzed, weather-beaten countenance of her companion. These two had their debts to pay; that much was sure. The Indian grunted, darkly stirred by what he read in their eyes.

Molly seemed to be waiting for Jeff to speak. She clasped her hands, perhaps only to hold them from entreating him, and her look was one of such intense anxiety that it was akin to terror. It was as if her whole world hung on his next few words.

He reached out his hands, finding hers. Their pulses leaped together, as if in united purpose. “It’s destiny, Molly,” he told her in hushed tones. “This

chance has come to me to atone for all my folly!" Then with mounting gusto, "We'll see to it, my girl. Molly, we'll see what can be done!"

XXIX

MOLLY and Jeff spent the next few days making detailed arrangements for the entertainment of Staritsa and Templeton when they should come gliding down the river. In Big Eagle they had an ally not to be despised, strong as a bull, crafty, and faithful to the death; but even with this help they were three against four, and they must overcome this disadvantage by strategy.

“We must separate them before we make our attack,” Jeff explained. “It’s our best chance. We must think of some way to separate the canoes.”

Molly made no suggestion at once, but repeated the message to Big Eagle. He grunted derisively. He saw no use in such tactics.

“Maybe lay on bank. Current swing ’m in close. Shoot ’m in canoe!”

Certainly Big Eagle had the idea, the primitive and therefore the natural idea, as Jeff had to agree on looking the matter squarely in the face. But civilization had at least reached above this. He shook his head, smiling.

“If we could only decoy the two white men away from the Indians,” the girl said thoughtfully. “We could—if we had the right kind of excuse—” Her words trailed off, simply because the intentness of her thought precluded articulation. Presently the dreamy luster left her eyes, and she was seen to grope with her finger ends down into the pocket of her jacket. Apparently satisfied, a little, sly pucker at her lips conveyed an idea of quaint humor, peculiarly her own. “Jeff, I believe I see a way to separate them. I think of a bait they can’t refuse to take. Jeff, what is the prize Staritsa is working for?”

“I suppose—Alaska!”

“Yes, but what does he want to get out of it himself? He is not altruistic by a long way, or patriotic either, and I understand he followed Karl out here partly to escape a scandal he was involved in, partly to recoup broken fortunes. Jeff, the thing he wants is—gold.”

“Yes. I suppose we all want that.”

“Good fishermen used to tell me that the best bait is the particular kind that the fish are feeding on. We should work the same principle in catching

men.” She paused again, and a little thoughtful line hovered on her clear brow. “My friend, I believe I see the way to win.”

In a few words she confided her plan. Much of its success depended on Big Eagle, but he was an intelligent native, entirely to be trusted. Molly took it upon herself to coach him in his part, making him go over it again and again until he was perfect in it. Dissimulation is a natural gift of savage peoples—as every one knows who has seen some of the more picturesque native pageants—and the bronzed Indian seemed to take real pleasure in the enterprise. In the first place, Big Eagle had certain debts of his own to pay. In the second, these two white people were among his lesser gods. They had won from him that strange adoration which members of an inferior race sometimes bear to the whites—not often seen, but as inexplicable as the love that a noble dog bears his master.

The hill just back of the camp commanded a view of the long azure curve of the river, and here Big Eagle watched for a distant glimpse of two canoes. To a white man this kind of sentry duty would have been almost intolerable—the long hours of waiting with only the trees and the chill November wind for company—but the Indian thrived on it. Inexhaustible patience is a noticeable trait of the American aborigines, simply because it is an essential attribute to the success of savage methods of hunting; and so still the native crouched, his eyes fastened on the sheen of the distant river, that he seemed an appurtenance to the landscape, and the little, restless, furtive woods people went about their hillside occupations without heeding him. Sometimes Jeff or Molly relieved him, and since there was no occasion for watching after nightfall—the voyageurs would certainly camp on the shore at night—he found the post quite to his liking.

The fifth afternoon after his arrival he saw what looked like a pair of ducks swimming on the furthest curve of the river. His quiet eyes peered from under his lowered brows until their wings flashed in the wan, winter light; then he turned and ran silently as a wolf down the hill to Jeff’s camp. The white man saw him come and guessed his tidings, but because he had glimpsed something of Indian psychology, he still sat quietly at the door of the cabin.

“They come,” the native began in evident excitement. “Big Eagle see ’m
—”

Jeff looked up steadily into the bronzed face. “Is that so, Big Eagle? That means we’ll have to get busy.” He puffed once at his pipe, yawned, and quietly knocked the ashes on to the ground.

This little mummery was exceeding good for Big Eagle. It steadied him; and indeed, so susceptible are the savage peoples to suggestion, that some of Jeff's self-control passed to him. "Big Eagle go now—get in canoe?" he asked.

"Yes. You know your part. Big Eagle, if the ruse doesn't work—if they won't come, Big Eagle—what you do?"

"Tip 'm canoe. Play didn't mean to. Act like help pick 'm up white man's. Tip 'm other canoe."

"That's the idea. We'll be there to help 'em out of the water when they swim ashore. They will swim to our bank because they'll be close to it. However, I don't think you'll have to tip the canoes. You know your part."

Big Eagle did not follow this, but Molly swiftly translated. The native then turned and trotted away down toward the river, cool and able to handle his part. Molly at once procured her revolver and strapped it on her slim waist, while Jeff got his rifle. They were ready for their work.

"It will take fifteen minutes more, at least, before they'll get into shouting distance of Big Eagle," Jeff said. "Perhaps we shouldn't let him start down so soon. A long wait might play havoc with his nerves."

"Don't worry about Big Eagle," Molly assured him. "He'll do his part. Any nervousness he shows they will attribute to fear. They know he's a runaway from Sitka; treachery is the last thing they'll think of."

"Good. Just the same, Molly, there's some risk. There is some risk even if he does do his part and lead them up to us. You never know how two men are going to react even to such a situation as this. They might—open fire."

The most friendly, cheerful smile danced into her face. It was not just at her lips—a feigned smile, to encourage him—nor was it merely a message of tenderness. It was in her eyes and her raised brows; she had smiled with something like joy in their mutual adventure, perhaps even in anticipation of a great patriotic service that was in their hands to do. He glimpsed her gay, brave soul as never before. He sensed her greatness, never to lose faith in it again. "They'll wish they hadn't, if they do," she told him. "If I see one of them reach for a pistol—"

"I know, Molly. We have taken every precaution for safety—"

"For *my* safety," she corrected him. "You are taking the only possible risk."

“Something might happen—to either of us,” he persisted, “and that’s the reason, Molly, that before we go into this thing—I have something to tell you.”

There was only a glimmer of her smile left now, a wistful and childlike fragment; and the profundities of mortal nature which were thus revealed—the fact that her mood now could be compatible with her intrepidity of a moment before—moved him to wonder.

“What is it, Jeff?”

“If this thing goes through—the way we want it to go through—I want you to know that you get all the credit. You are the hero of this affair, all the way through. It has been your influence, more than anything else, that has put me on the right track at last. It has been your brains and your courage and your inspiration that has held me up.”

“But what could I have done alone! A woman can’t make a lone struggle, Jeff; there always has to be some one to fight for, if she is to go on. A woman can’t fight for a principle, Jeff, unless it has personal meaning for her. Where would I have been without you?”

“We have only a moment now, before we make this last, big play,” Jeff went on. “No one can tell how it will turn out, so I want to tell you—only I can’t tell you—what these weeks with you have meant to me. You’ve made life worth living again. You’ve given me a theme to fight for. You have put some of your own ideals in me. And most of all, you have blessed me with the finest companionship, the dearest loving-kindness that I ever thought to find in this world. I’d go on my knees to you, if it would do any good, to beg forgiveness for all of my folly toward you. And no matter what happens from now on, I’ll never cease to bless you and worship you. From now on my life is yours—to do with as you will.”

He could not tell more than this—with words. Yet the shine in his eyes spoke volumes, and his arms, widening to let her in, were eloquent. For a certain time they stood thus, lost to the world that wheels in space, swept through the vault of heaven on a dream-world of their own, glorified by that old mystery which—beyond the reach of doubt or scorn—proves Godhead to lost, lonely human souls. He felt her heart pulsing against his own. He knew the sweetness of her lips.

XXX

WHEN STARITSA rounded a long bend in the river into a stretch of almost still water, he saw what seemed to be a native fisherman, drifting slowly down about a hundred feet from shore. The Russian was not greatly surprised, and not in the least alarmed. A few native trappers plied their lines through this Stikine country, selling their furs to far Hudson's Bay posts, but except when poisoned by lye concoctions sold by outlaw traders, they were not in the least hostile. He glanced toward his rifle—just to know where it was in case he needed it—and drifted down toward him. The native was facing downstream, and apparently did not hear the soft sound of the paddles.

It now became apparent that Staritsa's complacency was entirely justified. Instead of proving a menace, the native was plainly terrified by the white men who had paddled up behind him. Evidently he did not see them until they were within a few yards of him; and his subsequent conduct could hardly be misinterpreted. He started, then seized his paddle as if in a desperate effort to escape.

The white men behind him were able to follow his mental processes with entire ease. Plainly he realized that flight was impossible—that at this close range he would be promptly shot down with the white man's revolver—so he threw himself on their mercy. They saw him raise both arms in token of surrender.

"What's the matter with the fool?" Templeton called to his friend in the foremost canoe. He directed the native in the stern to let his craft drift. "Hasn't he ever seen a white man before?"

But now Staritsa was not heeding Templeton. He was listening keenly to the broken sentences uttered by the obviously terrified savage whose canoe now floated, within twenty feet of his own. As he was speaking in the bad Russian commonly used by natives in Russian-America, Templeton could not, of course, understand.

The native was begging Staritsa not to shoot, and was promising to yield without a fight and permit them to take him back to Sitka. They had pursued him far, but he had given up at last; and if they would be merciful he would violate no more of the Company's commands.

Staritsa opened his eyes, then turned to Templeton, whose curiosity had been quickened by the unintelligible talk. "He thinks we're after him," the Russian explained in English. He studied the bronze face. "Templeton, I have seen this man before. I believe he's a runaway from Sitka. By Heaven, I know him! His name is—Big Eagle, I fancy—something of the kind—and he's the fellow who tried to send a protest through to the Crown. I have a notion to arrest him and take him back with us."

But now he had occasion to listen even more carefully to the native's broken Russian. It appeared that the latter was offering some kind of a bribe for immunity, and bribes were particularly in Staritsa's line. And now an unexpected gleam between his eyelids and a curious look of strain about his lips and in his deep facial lines told Templeton that this conversation was decidedly worth hearing. If Jeff had been present instead of somewhere out of sight on the shore, he would have had cause to remember Staritsa's eyes when he had looked at a thousand sea otter, piled in savage magnificence in the ship's hold. For a moment he hesitated as if reluctant to make explanations to his friend, but presently recognized the need of his co-operation.

"Can either of our two men understand English?" he asked, turning to Templeton.

"You know they can't. At least, not more than an occasional word."

"We've run into a marvelous piece of luck, I think. This man is frightened near to death—I told you he supposes we came up here in pursuit of him—and he says if we will let him go he will enrich us both. He tells me that in these weeks he has been a—fugitive, you call it?—he has been living a few hundred feet back in the brush and has found gold—tons of gold the way he describes it. It is apparently the free gold, and although he has small idea of the value of such a find as this he describes, to me it is an argument for the truth of his story. Certainly he believes it himself."

Indeed, it was impossible to doubt him. His words, his manner, and his expression all declared his sincerity. In the face of such proof one did not recollect that guile is not an unknown Indian trait, and treachery had made him famous aforetime.

"You think it's worth investigation?"

"I am forced to think so. He wants us to come and see for ourselves. He says a third will go to each of us if we let him go free—and you know, my friend, what that means."

“A third means half, in this case.”

“If I am not a fool or a child! I think it will be wise to look into this matter, Templeton.”

Big Eagle was speaking again now, and the Russian took pains to listen. Big Eagle would show him a sample, perhaps, to prove that his story was true—such yellow dust as might have clung to his clothes. With Staritsa’s permission his hand groped inside his buckskin shirt, and drifting near with his canoe, he put a minute object in the former’s outstretched hand.

“What is it?” Templeton asked.

The Russian peered intently at a small-piece of yellow metal, about the size of a match head, cupped in his palm. His hand shook as he gave it into his friend’s keeping. “What do you say it is?”

“A nugget, of course. A small one—but surely a nugget of pure gold.”

“No chance for a mistake?”

“None. A man may see many things that he thinks might be gold. When he sees gold, he knows it. Where in the world could he have picked it up, man? This will be the biggest thing that ever happened to us. You don’t doubt that it’s gold, Staritsa?”

“I know it to be gold, and there must be more in the same pot. It will mean a fearful rush up here, little one, when the truth comes out. Tell your man to shove in to shore. We can take time to investigate this thing.”

The mine was only a few hundred paces in, Big Eagle told them, so no attempt was made to pitch camp. The canoes were left at the river’s edge. The native was prepared to suggest that the two canoe men be left behind to mind the cargoes—on the plea that he disliked to take them into his confidence as to the location of the mine—but it transpired that no such suggestion was needed. Until the gold deposits were definitely in their hands, the two white men had no intention of sharing with any one the knowledge of this incredible windfall.

“We might be able to get you a pardon—if the mine proves rich enough,” Staritsa told him, as they walked in single file on a bear trail which led through the woods. “You find out, Big Eagle, that you could not possibly get away. We have followed you a long time, and we overtake you at last.”

Templeton knew those quickening suspicions that curse men in the presence of gold and demanded a translation of Staritsa’s remark. “I was merely assuring him that he has been our quarry for a long time—to prevent

any possible perception of the real truth,” Staritsa explained. “We wish him not to become suspicious.”

It was mutual. Big Eagle, fired with his master’s purpose, hoped that the two men behind him would also refrain from any untoward suspicions.

There was no need to fear. They could hardly walk fast enough along the trail. They were not given time to notice suspicious circumstances, much less to dwell upon them. Jeff’s strategy centered about the idea of one swift, telling blow, and the distance to the native’s “mine” had been made purposely short. About two hundred yards from the river the trail touched the bank of a small stream, and here, in a small rift in the underbrush, stood a smoked cooking rack about which were strewn a few pieces of camp equipment, some fuel, and other signs of a native establishment. Muttering earnestly, Big Eagle picked up the iron kettle that was evidently his only piece of cooking ware, and carrying it to the creek, partly filled it with sand and gravel. This he washed, as if the kettle were a gold pan.

He was very deliberate about it, exceedingly careful. Staritsa and Templeton watched him with fascinated interest. Raw gold makes men mad far more than moonlight ever did; and the strain was beginning to tell on these two silent, breathless spectators. They wished he would hurry. With an impassive face he rocked the kettle to and fro in his hands.

Soon almost all the gravel was washed out. He knelt down to examine his washings. One on each side, the white men knelt also, craning their aristocratic necks to see into the kettle.

It was at this instant that Staritsa had an acute feeling of discomfort. It grew upon him, and he glanced uneasily across the stream. He found the black eye of a rifle barrel looking squarely into his.

A tall figure stood on the opposite shore, with a rifle pressed against his shoulder. He and his friend were snugly and comfortably covered.

“Put up your hands and don’t make a sound,” Jeff Sharp told them.

XXXI

IF STARITSA had any desire to ask questions, he quickly smothered the impulse. The voice behind the gun had cautioned him not to make a sound of any kind, and there was an unpleasant possibility that it was in earnest. The rifle, he noticed, shook not at all. The eye behind it gazed along the line of sight with no wavering or evasiveness whatever. The voice had a rasping note which grated upon Staritsa's fine sensibilities.

His arms went quickly into the air. Templeton, never a fool, made the same gesture. Neither man so much as paused to grope into the kettle to make sure it was empty—quite, amazingly empty, if the truth must be told. The native, however, made no sign that he was disconcerted by the turn events had taken and made no effort to comply with Jeff's request. He did, however, step around behind the two white men, feel over their bodies for weapons, disarm them, and lying close to the ground so not to interfere with any bullets in case the affair reached the shooting stage, put cords about the ankles of each man in turn. This done, he tugged at Staritsa's arms, indicating that he wished them lowered, but the young nobleman continued to hold them stiffly up as if they were frozen there. It was only when Jeff gave the word that he permitted them to be drawn behind him and tied.

This did not mean that Staritsa was, in every sense, a coward. Undoubtedly under certain circumstances he would take his chance with the rest. His actions now were guided by but one thought: that this man behind the gun owed him various debts of hatred and evil which he was likely eager to pay. If he, Staritsa, misunderstood any of Jeff's commands, if he hesitated for one instant to comply with them, the latter would have an excuse to pay in full.

He was not inclined to call out. Never Jeff's enemy in the sense that Staritsa was, Templeton was a gentleman of many sporting instincts, but he also concluded to remain silent. He felt that his chance gods had decreed against such a course. He had an unpleasant idea that the rifle would interrupt any remark he might attempt to make.

Big Eagle tied his arms and then prevented any further danger of outcry by slipping a gag into his mouth, tying it firmly behind his head. Staritsa was likewise silenced, and then they were laid side by side in the grass.

As yet no one had taken the trouble to tell them what was to be done with them. Staritsa thought that the impulse behind the attack was surely vengeance; and it was no wonder that his heart quailed, and his life stream was chilled and repressed. The winter clouds spreading overhead were no more cold and white than Jeff's face; the tall, dark spruce no more calm, inexorable, and impassive than this bronze-skinned native who swiftly, deftly tied his bonds. Templeton had only the vaguest theories to account for these strange happenings, so he lay quietly on the earth and awaited developments.

It now appeared that there was a third conspirator whose presence neither man had guessed. Molly stepped out of a thicket just behind, and at the sight of her revolver Templeton was increasingly glad he had not attempted resistance. Now with her help Jeff searched Staritsa's person.

In a leather case they found a sheet of parchment bearing the seal of Hudson's Bay Company. A glance over it assured them beyond any possible doubt of its true nature: it was the treaty between the great English and Russian companies which, if permitted to become operative, would destroy any hope of American possession of Alaska.

"It is even more drastic than I thought," Jeff said. These were the first words between himself and the girl since they had emerged from ambush. "Its terms would have justified a renewal of the Russian Company's charter with the Czar, and surely it would have ultimately made Alaska an English possession."

"And it will be an American possession now!" the girl exulted.

"If all goes well. But we must make no mistakes, Molly, if our plan is to succeed."

Jeff now read the treaty carefully, familiarizing himself with its few paragraphs. Then, striking a match, he gave the parchment to the flames.

The act required no little courage. The natural impulse was to keep it a while, to hold it by him, to postpone its destruction until he could go over the matter in his thoughts, perhaps with the excuse of showing it to his superior. Yet in some ways this man was wise beyond his years; and he knew the resistless power of circumstance. It was not in him to read the future. Things he had thought were sure proved fallible; safe things had been lost. He knew that the longer he kept this important document the greater the chance it would slip out of his hands.

“Am I doing the right thing?” he asked Molly, as the blue flame crawled across the sheet.

“According to the best we know,” she answered quietly, the fire reflecting in her eyes. Her tone showed she was deeply moved; not often the case with this strong heart. “That’s all we can hope to do—right and wrong are far beyond us.”

Staritsa was still afraid for his life, and his mind was far from the burning script; but Templeton stirred in his bonds and a dim, subdued half-gasp escaped through the cloth of his gag. The ratification of this treaty meant much to him. Men in high circles had promised him great rewards if he should see it through. Now this backwoods diplomat whom he had scorned had beaten him at his own game.

When the paper was destroyed and its ashes scattered on the damp earth, Jeff was ready to take the next step to win Alaska for his country. “I’m going to take off your bonds, Staritsa,” he said, “then you will walk with me down to where you left your canoes. You will give certain orders to your natives—and since this lady going with us understands every language you understand, it would be wise to give only the orders that we tell you to give. In my pocket I shall carry a cocked revolver, and it will be pointed at you every second. If you make one suspicious movement, if you play false with us in the least detail, I shall press the trigger without waiting. I shall not take pains to be sure. Your life is not so valuable to me that I’d feel like taking a chance. Besides—your men would not try to save you. They are friends of Big Eagle, and they will join with us if we ask them to.”

After searching the Russian again carefully for any weapon which they might have overlooked, Big Eagle took off his bonds. Jeff meanwhile stood back, guarding with the revolver. Then leaving the Indian to guard Templeton, the two Americans walked their prisoner down toward the river.

He was a docile captive. Any warlike impulse that quickened within him was speedily quelled when he remembered the revolver muzzle, pointing through the cloth of Jeff’s pocket. He walked out on the river bank, and standing at Jeff’s side, obeyed his orders like a soldier.

“We are not going on,” he said in the vernacular. “New business has come up which keeps us here. When I have paid you, you will go back to your people on Upreanof Island and remain there until I come for you, which may be four moons from now. If in the meantime any Muscovite ask of us, you will tell him that the parley with the Red Coats came to nothing,

and that we are off on a new track. Otherwise, still lips is wisdom, and the less you talk of us the greater your reward when we meet again.”

The natives were apparently prepared for any sort of madness on the part of their employers; perhaps there had been similar revolutionary changes in program earlier in the journey. Their brown faces scarcely changed expression. Stolidly they went to work to load certain of the supplies and the two white men's personal possessions in one of the two canoes. A few minutes later they boarded the other of the two crafts and paddled away down the river.

They progressed with that steady, tireless, mile-speeding stroke of the native voyageur, and although Molly followed them with her eyes, not once did she see them turn to look behind.

Staritsa was marched back to join his friend, and both captives were firmly but not uncomfortably confined. The former was given leave to speak now, but apparently he could think of nothing worth saying. Perhaps, he had talked himself out on the night of Jeff's arrest. Templeton spoke a few words at intervals, and his tone showed that he bore little resentment toward his captors. Although bitterly disappointed and deeply chagrined, he seemed to feel that the game had been played according to the rules, and that the secret agent from America was simply a smarter man than he had taken him for. He was a diplomat of the old school—a secret-service man who knew the code—and he would make no complaints through Whitehall Street. Besides, he was an Englishman.

Jeff commented on this attitude later the same evening, when the cabin hearth was red and Big Eagle stood guard over the prisoners. “They are sportsmen, those fellows,” he observed, speaking of his race brothers across the sea. “We'll have to hand 'em that—even fellows like Templeton, in the game for himself more than for England, and personally unscrupulous and dishonest. Molly, I think our relations with England will be different as the years go by—when they are willing for us to dominate the New World, themselves content with supreme power in the Old. I believe—I feel sure—that when England has more of a popular government than she has now, when peers count less and just people count more, she will be America's first friend. It was her governing classes, not the people, who wanted to see the Union destroyed. I'll try to look out for Templeton's comfort when we send him into his winter quarters.”

His hand groped and found hers. The ruddy light showed her almost hidden smile and shone into the amazing blueness of her eyes. Her hope

leaped like the flame.

“Of course you’ll be kind to him,” she said thoughtfully. “I am only afraid you’ll be too kind to Staritsa, now he is in your power. Jeff, did you ever dream that the thing could end like this?”

“It isn’t ended, yet. You can be sure that Templeton still has hopes of turning the tables on us. If no unexpected developments occur between now and February—the expiration of the time limit granted the Company by the Czar—we’ll win; but it is too soon to say for sure.”

“I don’t see how you can help but win now. Surely you won’t let those men escape.”

“Not a chance, Molly. The guard that will be put over them never relaxes vigilance and is the safest in the world—Old Man Winter!”

“I should say that the only danger now is a personal danger—to us. We’re not home yet. Karl will be wild for vengeance when he learns you’ve tricked him.”

“I’m afraid he won’t take it kindly, sure enough. But Molly—what do you mean by saying ‘you?’ Why don’t you say ‘we!’” A sober look, ineffably dear to her, hovered about his lips. “For that matter, why don’t you say ‘I.’ We’ve been going on your brains all the way through.”

The pressure of her hand was suddenly intense. “That isn’t true, Jeff,” she told him earnestly. “I only thought of the trick. Women are especially good at thinking up tricks—we have a tricky streak in our minds—but usually it takes a man to put them into practice. I couldn’t possibly have outwitted Staritsa without your help; that is the truth, Jeff, if I ever told it.”

His sober mood passed, and he grinned widely as he recalled the day’s stratagem. “Molly, that tricky streak of yours will probably win Alaska for America. They simply swallowed hook, bait, and sinker. But there’s one thing you haven’t taken the trouble to explain to me—and at first I was resolved I wouldn’t ask. I thought maybe I could figure it out for myself. I wanted to take credit for that much brains, at least. But, Molly, I just can’t get it. It pains me to inquire—but where did you get that little nugget?”

The girl’s shy smile touched certain responsive chords in his heart until now unguessed; and he beamed like a schoolboy. “Are you sure it was gold, Jeff?”

“If it wasn’t, it was the best imitation I ever saw. I would swear it was a nugget.”

“Well, I suppose I could call it a nugget. Jeff, it was real gold, sure enough—and when I saw how mystified you were I just couldn’t help but try to play on your curiosity. Now I’m almost ashamed to tell you where I got it.”

“Surely you didn’t find it?”

“Well, in a way. Jeff, do you remember that awful toothache you nursed me through one night?”

“I fancy I won’t forget it.”

“Well, that nugget was—the filling.”

XXXII

THE next morning Jeff and Big Eagle started down river with their prisoners. Jeff sat in the stem of the skin-boat, paddling and guiding, and Staritsa was permitted to help the boat along with his rather awkward paddling in the bow. Since the nobleman's feet were securely confined, he was not in the least inclined to rock the boat and escape from his captor by swimming. Templeton, also comfortably but securely confined, paddled in the bow of his own canoe—left by the natives the previous day—and Big Eagle guided from the stern. The winter was impending, so they did not loiter along the way. Traveling early and late, they reached the mouth of the Iskut in a single day's travel and camped on its green bank for a short rest. For four days thereafter they paddled and lined the boats up the wild waters of the Iskut, fetching up at last at the fall fish camp of a small tribe of friendly Indians.

Five days' delay would have brought them in too late for the success of Jeff's plan. The natives were even then breaking camp preparatory to going into winter quarters beyond the mountains. At this point Jeff gave the prisoners into the complete charge of Big Eagle, at once turning back toward his cabin where Molly had been left alone. There was no need to concern himself further about Templeton and Staritsa. He had left them in safe hands, and Sitka would know them no more, at least until spring.

They were to go with the tribe into winter quarters, and since the ranges would soon be overspread with thirty feet of soft snow, they could not readily retrace their steps until the late winter winds crusted the drifts and reopened the passes. Big Eagle had plenty of men to help guard them—natives who looked up to him as Chief—but the white captives would require little guarding after the great cold closed down in earnest. As Jeff had hinted, the white sea could maroon a man beyond any hope of delivery. The natives were told to feed and care for them, and when the day and night were again of equal length, to turn them loose.

The winter was breaking swiftly now; and Jeff raced it back to Molly. The four-day climb to the fish camp was retraced in one day with the Iskut's surging waters behind him; and traveling light, he made phenomenal time up the Stikine toward home. Only the great river's depth and power kept it open now to the easy passage of his craft. The shallow, glittering, woodland pools

had died, their sweet vivacity repressed by the dour frost; and the little rivulets flowed under gray ice. Every night the Great Cold encroached further on to the land.

One bitter twilight he saw his familiar landing through the softly falling snow. Paddling swiftly, the boat soon touched the shore. The snow-laden branches of the underbrush lashed at him as he trotted up the dear, familiar trail—as if they hated him and resented his safe arrival and it had been the wood gods’ plan to snare him in some distant covert and still with frost the red rivulets of his veins. The gleam from an open doorway guided him home, as it would always lead him through the forest and the night. And now he saw Molly standing waiting.

Winter had little terror for the two exiles in the rude cabin in the Stikine. The fire was bright on the hearth, they had abundant food of a rough, coarse, but healthful kind, and their companionship was known and tried aforetime. On snowshoes or skis, fabricated rather clumsily by their combined efforts, they tasted all the rough joys loved of old by a hardy, Northern people; they hunted wild game, eating the meat and sewing the skins into garments; they trapped the fur bearers; they tracked the small, shy, forest people over the snow. When the blizzards swept the land or when they were tired of forest adventure they had pleasant, comfortable hours before their cheery hearth; and they knew hushed nights of wonder and mystery.

The river became a hard road to walk on, and the late winter winds blew off the snow and left it glare ice, on which a sled moved almost of itself. The nights lengthened and the twilight lingered long under the trees; but the tide slackened and changed, and they began to grow long again. Neither of them dreamed that the weeks could fly so fast. It was no wonder that the calculations Jeff made one clear morning of sunlit, glittering snow was a revelation to them both.

He came to table for breakfast with something on his mind; Molly had learned to interpret the sparkle in his black eyes and the grave, rather boyish wonderment in plain sight about his lips. Presently he smiled at her; and she walked about the table and stood at his chair. “Molly, have you any idea what day this is?” he asked solemnly.

She puzzled a moment. “It must be late in January.”

“It is the sixth day of February, that’s what! I’ve just been counting the notches on my calendar. Molly, what does that mean?”

“It means—you have won. It means Alaska is ours.”

"I think so, Molly. Unless some unforeseen thing has come up, the Russian Company's time limit in which to renew their charter has expired, and the Russian minister is on his way to Washington, authorized by the Czar to sell Alaska to us. I don't doubt but that the deal is practically settled by now."

"It is a great victory!" she told him solemnly.

"Yes, I think it is," he agreed thoughtfully. "Just the same, Molly—there won't be any firecrackers shot off, or flares lighted on the streets of Washington. Alaska means very little to most of our people. They think it is just an iceberg, and will probably call Seward a fool for buying it. But we know, don't we, Molly?"

"A territory equal in size to the original thirteen States! Surely they won't make light of that."

"They won't know any better; but they'll find out in time. Molly, posterity will be mighty glad we own Alaska. It is a new land for us to tame. It is a frontier to go to—to try our thews on—when the rest of the continent is fenced and under the plow! We are a pioneer nation, Molly—as you once told me yourself. We can't cage ourselves up in cities if we are going to maintain the breed; we must have a mountain to climb, a trail to follow, a new horizon to beckon us on. If the old, daring, fighting, mastering strain is to survive, there must be something to dare, a foe to fight, a new world to master! The restless ones must have a far country, Molly—and Alaska is the answer."

"I suppose it will be a long, long time before it comes into its own."

"A century, perhaps. In the meantime Sitka will probably almost die away, just as you prophesied not long ago. As you say, Americans are not spoilers; and the great fur-bringing system that made Sitka will pass away with the departing Muscovite. But Sitka will be born again, when the home-makers come to stay.

"There's one thing more, Molly, that I don't believe Seward has given much thought to: that Alaska can be America's great playground. There are thousands upon thousands of square miles of territory that will never grow wheat and can never support a dense population. Here the rivers will always swarm with trout, the waterfowl will fly in flocks to blacken the sun over the marshes, and the moose and bear, caribou and sheep will roam at will in the forests and the ranges. These things are worth more than gold, Molly; never doubt that for a minute. We are naturally an adventurous people, a race of hunters who perish if kept too long indoors; and here we can find our

recreation. Our great leaders, tired and sick, can come here to forget their worries, to shoot and fish and gather strength to come back and lead us again. I think that in this we may find Alaska's greatest value."

It transpired that Molly made no immediate answer. These two had reckoned without their host if they had dreamed that their Alaskan affair had run its course. As Jeff's earnest, ringing tone trailed off, both quickened to a subdued sound just outside the cabin door. It was not the way of wild beasts to come so close, even in this land where man had not yet proved mastery. The pack had fed well and ranged far from the pungent wood smoke; the dour old grizzly slept deeply in a distant cavern. Jeff turned to get his rifle from its rack of caribou horn; but he was to miss the feel of the trusted steel. The door suddenly opened.

A bearded soldier in the winter uniform of a sergeant of the Russian army stood on the threshold. His squad with ready rifles behind him.

Karl's wound smarted still, and even here his hate had found its way.

XXXIII

JEFF glanced toward Molly for guidance—a frequent act of late—and her smile told him not to attempt resistance to the foe. He nodded in token of surrender, and the sergeant, uttering a guttural command in his own tongue, came in and quietly seized his weapons. He took the rifle from its rack, and he did not overlook the heavy revolver in the holster suspended on the cabin wall. He was evidently a thorough soldier—a picked man—for from Jeff's belt he slipped the hunting knife which might have other uses than quartering game.

Meanwhile Jeff waited quietly for what might befall. No time since they had met was he more keenly conscious of the girl's presence, or more thankful for it; in hours like these she proved her worth. Molly had filled the breach before now, and she was not through yet. He knew that treasured consolation of a real helpmeet, such as were once the bulwark of American greatness.

He addressed her casually, not without humor. "I wish we had your precious nugget now, Molly. The chap looked as if he might be bribed."

"Never mind, Jeff. They must have come with dog teams, so we'll get a free ride down to Sitka, anyway."

Such seemed to be the program, without aggravating delay. This Muscovite proved an expeditious fellow; and since the morning was yet young he made immediate preparations for departure. He signalled for the two to procure their wraps and a few of their more essential supplies, and to prevent accidents, slipped a pair of loose wristlets on Jeff. Calling in one of his men to guard the prisoners, he stepped out and ordered up his dogs.

"Can this lad talk English, you think?" Jeff said to the girl.

"Try him and see."

Jeff addressed the man, but his stony look indicated either that he failed to understand or that he obeyed implicitly the old-time military order concerning conversation with prisoners. To be safe, Jeff stepped to Molly's side and spoke in an undertone. "Slip our little file in your pocket, if you can," he instructed. "We may get a chance to slip during the night."

“I will, but it won’t do us the least good,” was the whispered reply. “They could track us anywhere in the snow, and overtake us with their dog teams.”

She spoke with unusual cheerfulness. Jeff appreciated her good spirits; but at the same time he wondered if she fully realized what this arrest meant. The *Ethan Allen* was not in the harbor, waiting to fly with him. But this time the *Neva II* might be ready to sail again.

The dogs were driven up to the door, and the strength and size of the teams indicated they had been imported from far in the interior. In a very few minutes the entire party was under way, down the wide, glassy road of the frozen river.

Karl was plainly eager to greet his guests, as every arrangement had been made for a quick trip. They were not to walk, as is usually necessary in traveling long distances in the North, but were given seats on different sleds, each with a single guard. The teams started off at a running pace, leaving the pack sleds and the remainder of the squad far in the rear. Except for the fear that burned him, the winter journey would have been the keenest delight to Jeff, and surely no mode of travel in the known world could compare with this new experience. It was a most novel and invigorating trip; the sled skimming behind the long, running pack, ice-shod; the air cold and thin and preternaturally clear; the winter forest whipping by. If Molly had any fear she certainly did not show it. Of course she was merely trying to encourage Jeff, but the way her voice rang when she called back to encourage his somewhat slower team, and her laughter on the wind that swept over his head seemed so real that it actually embittered him.

They were to make the trip in three days’ run, unusual time indeed for such a distance. Two supply depots had been established at intervals between the cabin and the river’s mouth, winter camps made, robes provided for the prisoners’ beds, food cached for the dogs and fuel cut for roaring fires. These things had been done purely to expedite the journey, yet they added materially to the comfort of the captives. It was also true that the guards were fairly courteous and considerate, not by Karl’s orders, but probably in spite of them. Indeed, it was highly improbable that Karl had relented sufficiently to order fair and decent treatment toward the prisoners; but the men were average, kindly peasants, and a rigorous system had taught them particular respect for people of Jeff’s apparent caste. However, they obeyed strict orders so far as maintaining vigilant guard.

When they reached the second supply camp—after two days' hard journey—Jeff again broached the idea of flight. "We might slip out after they leave us for the night, and with a long head start, we could possibly get clear away," he whispered to Molly in the darkness of their tent. "You know we are close to the mouth of the Iskut. We could follow up the river on the ice and cross the mountains to the Indian encampment where we sent Staritsa and Templeton. I know approximately where it is, and the snow on the range is probably passable by now, even without snowshoes. It would be a long chance, I know—but any chance is better than none at all."

"You couldn't possibly make it without snowshoes, Jeff," was the answer. "I know the snow is packed and crusted by now, but even if it would hold you up, you'd give out before you could ever get across."

"You don't think there's any chance?"

"A good chance for immediate death—that's all. It is a long, long way, Jeff; and men can't travel these winter woods without supplies and equipment. They would catch us before we ever got started. If they didn't catch us, we'd perish of hunger and cold before we could ever find that native village."

"A man can stand more than you ever dream, if he has to. That village is somewhere on the headwaters of the Nass River; and we might be lucky enough to run into it. Molly, do you think Karl means any harm by you?"

"No. I'm not important enough to harm. I'm not afraid for myself."

"You don't seem very much afraid for me, either. Just the same, Molly, I put no trust whatever in Karl, and I don't believe I would feel too secure. Except for this, I'd leave you and try to slip away to-night. It is plain you won't come with me."

"I couldn't let you go, even if you wanted to," was her answer. "I couldn't let you throw away your life on such a reckless chance."

"But you admit it is a chance—and I don't see how I have any kind of a chance if we go to Sitka. Of course, I wouldn't leave you—if you'd beg me to—but just the same, it is the only possible hope for me."

But the girl was stubborn. "It's the slimmest kind of a hope, at best. Jeff, you must stay and help me."

This was so unlike Molly that Jeff was amazed. Evidently she had no real conception of the fate that awaited him. Hopeless, more or less embittered, he turned from her and sought the oblivion of slumber.

The party started on in the dawn, taking advantage of the river ice past the mouth of the Iskut and almost to the sea. When the warm breath of the Japan current began to make itself felt, the sleds were drawn up on the snowy river bank, and at a much slower pace, guided between the trees down to the beach. Here a boat was waiting to take them on to Sitka.

In the afternoon of the next day they stepped again on the dock of the old Russian town. No courteous princes stepped down to meet them to-day; and among the few loiterers on the dock Jeff did not recognize a familiar face. Molly appeared to be more fortunate; as he waited for the guard to march him away, he saw her approach a man in uniform—plainly a soldier; from the garrison, at present off duty—and speak to him in a quiet voice. He immediately turned and left the dock; and though Jeff was mystified, the time did not permit an explanation. The guard stepped to his side and at once escorted both himself and Molly up the hill to the Governor's house, historic Baronof Castle that had seen the beginning of Jeff's adventure and now would doubtless behold its end.

Evidently he was to hear his fate at once. It appeared that Prince Maksoutof was absent from the city, but he had not left his chair unoccupied. Count Yanovisk was present to take care of routine matters, and erect and handsome in the Governor's place, the fountainhead of Alaskan law, was Baron Karl, last seen when Jeff had left him injured on the dueling field.

He had made a startling recovery. Karl was wholly his picturesque self. His paleness seemed more likely the effect of quickened emotions rather than the aftermath of his long confinement; and it actually became him. He bowed to Molly; and now, as Jeff looked him in the face, he had the bearing of supreme triumph. This was plainly a long-awaited hour.

"Well, Sharp, we meet again," he began in his own, not ungraceful way.

"Yes, Baron Karl." He knew the code, this Southern gentleman, and he managed a dim smile. "Under not such pleasant circumstances, however, as the last time we met."

"That was quite a triumph for you," Karl observed. At this point he glanced toward an officer who was just entering the room, but it was apparently an unexpected call and did not long divert his attention from Jeff. The latter recognized the officer as Colonel Semanof, in command of the garrison; and since he sat down quietly to wait his chief's leisure, his business appeared to be of no great urgency.

“Quite a triumph,” the man in the Governor’s chair repeated. “I suppose you felt you had risen high, to have shot down Baron Karl. You were even more self-congratulatory when you escaped from prison. What must your triumph have been when you successfully blocked our treaty with Hudson’s Bay Company—and through them, with England—I can not imagine. The backwoods American certainly moved into great company.”

“So the treaty is blocked, then?”

“The Czar has just notified us of his intention to sell all of Russian-America to the United States; I think this news will undoubtedly keep you cheerful during any disagreeable situation in which you may find yourself in the future. You have had many signal triumphs, Sharp—and it will be a great pity that we can not watch your further progress.”

“I am to go away?” Jeff asked.

“Rather speedily, I fear. The captain of the ship is impatient to sail. Your affair is just one of many which we wished to clear up before America occupies the territory. No, I am afraid I have seen the last of your great exploits, my friend.”

“Before I go I will gladly give you an opportunity to see one more.”

This shot went home. The vein at Karl’s temple throbbed and leaped; and for a moment he actually forgot the dim echo of a smile that until now had lingered about his clean-shaven lips. This room was full of people whom he would have rather not heard this sally: Yanovisk, Semanof—providing the latter’s meager knowledge of English permitted him to understand—Molly, who smiled into his eyes, and various under secretaries. Karl was a proud man, secure in his strength; yet he could not answer this challenge as in former days. There are certain limitations to every man’s courage, and this was his. Their last meeting had taught him a bitter lesson.

“An affair of honor is impossible between you and me,” was his sober reply. “A duel must of a necessity be fought between people of something like equal rank and similar traditions; thus each can be fairly sure that the guns are loaded—and the caps contain powder. I have tasted enough of your kind of dueling, my friend.”

“You were simply hoisted by your own petard, Karl, and you know it.”

“We will not discuss that further. My friends realize the truth, and what you say will not likely change them. We are trifling time; we must get to the business in hand. You will have time in plenty later to dwell upon these matters. Sharp, you have won from us many things. We supposed you were

in your own country, out of our reach; but fate has put you in our hands at last.”

“The *Ethan Allen* escaped, then?”

“A fog came up, and we lost her among the islands. We supposed that you were aboard her, until a story leaked through from Upreanof Island of your capture and the murder of Staritsa and Templeton—a story I was able to piece out from the most meager details. Although the truth reached us too late to save Alaska, at least we can collect a certain measure of payment from you. It helped console us for our loss to learn you were still in easy reach.”

“We did not kill Staritsa and Templeton. They are at present in a winter village on the upper Nass River and will return later in the spring.”

“Yes?”

“That is true, as I stand here. I owed Staritsa something better; but Americans are not dogs, to tear a victim when he is down.”

“This is very good news for us, but I fear it will not change your fate. America has not occupied Alaska yet, Sharp, and will not for some weeks. Our law is still supreme. We still have power to take care of you; and the report that goes to Washington of your deeply deplored and mysterious absence will never be questioned. If it is questioned, there will be no one to answer; I will be in a far country where I may not readily be found. You will be given a number—over there—and of all living beings, I will be the only one to know what name corresponds with that number. Partly through your efforts we have lost Russian-America. Now you are to lose your very name. Perhaps thus we may teach a peasant not to interfere in the concerns of his betters. The guards may lead you out now, and to-night they will put you aboard the ship. Special guards will see that there will be no further jail-breaking. Little brother, we bid you farewell—to Alaska.”

The full meaning of this sentence silenced Jeff; yet Karl was not to go unanswered. In the little, moving pause following his words of hate, a clear voice reached him from an unexpected quarter. An amazingly clear voice, it was; not loud, but remarkably penetrating in the hushed room.

“He is not to go at once, Baron Karl,” this voice said.

Karl turned to find Molly’s clear eyes looking straight into his own. He did not know why this glance disconcerted him in a way never previously experienced; and why dark forebodings, mysterious as a distant cloud, bore

heavily upon him. "What are you saying?" he demanded. "Do you dare question my order?"

"I question a great deal more than that," was the girl's reply. "Mr. Sharp is not going to Siberia; never think for a moment that he is. I believe, Baron Karl, that during your dictatorship out here Colonel Semanof has been directly under your command, and his troops have put your commands into effect. Colonel Semanof is here to-day to see to it that a higher law than yours is obeyed, one that no one here dare disobey. He will agree with me that you never made a greater mistake than to think this American citizen would go to Siberia in chains!"

Her voice had a ringing tone of conviction not easy to mistake; and her eyes flashed and warm waves of color came and went in the higher curves of her cheeks. Karl stared at her, then turned to the chief officer of the garrison.

"What are you doing here, Semanof?" he asked in Russian. "I did not tell you to come."

"I was told to come in the name of our Royal Master," was the reply. "I know nothing else."

"You will know in an instant," Molly told him emphatically. The conversation was now unintelligible to Jeff, but to his amazement, Molly seemed not only to follow it but to take part in it. "Colonel, I have something here that is of interest to you to read."

She produced a small folder of black leather, and from this she drew a folded sheet of parchment. Semanof's wondering eyes glanced down the lines.

There was only a paragraph or two written on the sheet, but their effect upon this quiet soldier was instantaneous and sensational. His heels snapped together with an audible click, and with a stiff gesture he held out the paper for Molly to take. As soon as her fingers closed upon it, his right hand went up in a rigid salute; and he held the position without a tremor until Molly spoke certain quiet words which Jeff did not comprehend.

Karl was not such a fool as to misunderstand; yet he smiled wanly in his place. For all his iniquity this Russian nobleman was a man of iron.

"It must be a most interesting document, Semanof," he observed. "I can't help feeling curious—"

"It is an order dated June 1st, 1866, commissioning the bearer, Mary Forest, as his Majesty's special representative in this territory, with authority

superior to that of the Governor and all other agents, and subject only to Imperial countermand,” Molly explained. “It supersedes all previous edicts and commissions heretofore granted in Russian-America.”

“You have certainly been a long time bringing it to the light,” Karl remarked pleasantly. No look or tone hinted at his realization of certain downfall. “May I ask who signed the document?”

“The Czar!”

At that name every man in the room was on his feet.

XXXIV

ALL this did not make very good sense to Jeff. He felt that he was making some sort of a show of himself, standing with round eyes as if he had lost his wits. He simply could not adjust himself to this extraordinary situation; and what was doubly unfortunate, Molly was at present altogether too busy to explain matters to him.

It appeared that she had to give certain directions to Semanof, Yanovisk, and other high officials of the Company as to the governing of the province until America could take possession. Prince Maksoutof, still a trusted friend of Alexander II, was to retain nominal control of the province, and since he had escaped from Karl's dominance, no one anticipated misrule. Semanof, subject at last to a higher law than Karl's, would remain in control of the garrison, while his former dictator would go to Russia to face the charge of treason.

Indeed, the tempered light of early evening lay over the town before Molly and Jeff had a word alone together.

At last they walked side by side up Lover's Lane—the Governor's walk of the Muscovite—and Molly explained everything to Jeff's satisfaction.

"You see, Alexander II was suspicious of Karl and his crowd," she told him. "The Russian Company had fallen into evil ways, due to the rise in power of a little group of men headed by Baron Karl and Staritsa; and the Czar knew—or believed—they were playing fast and loose with him. As you know, he wanted to sell Alaska to America—for various reasons—but pressure was brought to bear upon him and he gave the Company until February first to renew their charter. He feared that Karl would betray him in connection with the proposed treaty with the English company; and when I left St. Petersburg last summer, he instructed me to represent him personally in his American possessions, so if it became necessary, I could oppose Karl and counteract all his evil works."

"Then the sale of Alaska to America would have gone through anyway—whether we blocked that treaty or not?"

"Not at all. The Czar had stated his terms for a renewal of the charter and he had to give the Company a chance to accept them if they would. I had no power to block the treaty with Hudson's Bay Company, because I

had no official position in the Russian Company. I was simply a special agent of an absolute monarch—representing his unimpeachable power. Thanks to Seward’s vision, what we did up there on the river saved Alaska for America.

“I was told not to exert my authority, or even to reveal it, until I was forced to do so. You can see why: Karl would have carried on his activities under cover instead of in the open, and he would have certainly rushed matters in closing the deal with the English company. I didn’t want to reveal my true position until their time limit had expired, and Karl had shown his true colors.”

“I suppose you are a subject of the Czar, instead of an American,” Jeff commented in a somewhat regretful tone.

“Of course I am an American, and born in America. Just the same, I have spent the greater part of my life in Russia. You didn’t think I learned to speak Russian on an American ship, did you, Jeff? I was able to talk to all these natives speaking bastard Russian—the Sitkan Kolosh—and I could hear many things I was not supposed to hear. Jeff, did you ever hear of Thaddeus Forest?”

“I remember his name. A statesman of some sort, wasn’t he? I don’t remember just what he did—”

“He was our ambassador to Russia, some years ago. It is strange you never connected me up with him.”

“You are his daughter, of course.” Jeff smiled, and she knew that some of his humor prevailed in him again. “Molly, you needn’t ever be surprised at any of my omissions. I’m just a very common and ordinary variety of fool!”

“The present Czar became attached to me when I was a child at the Russian Court,” Molly went on. “He always liked me, called me *Douschka*, rode and talked with me, and had a surprising lot of confidence in me. I have continued a friendship with him ever since, and trusting me a great deal—much more than I deserve—he asked me, when I left St. Petersburg last summer—to take this post out here, to protect his interests all I could against Karl and his friends. He told me I could do it as well as any man he knew, and was less likely to waken suspicion. Mr. Seward was aware of my appointment, and knowing you—better than you know yourself—he sent you up here, too. He knew you could help me and I could help you.”

"I'll admit you have helped me, but I can't remember that I've been any great help to you—except to get in scrapes for you to get me out of," Jeff commented. "I suppose I was told to sail on the *Ethan Allen* because you were on it. You are no more relation of Captain Skinner than I am. Instead of the niece of a humble seaman you are the daughter of a great man, an ambassador from America!"

"You are not looking at the matter quite straight, Jeff. That has been the trouble: you have been inclined to do some of your thinking in circles. You must not assume, in America, that the niece of a humble man cannot be the daughter of a great one. Here, thank Heaven, lies America's greatness! You must not suppose that a cobbler can not be the brother of the President. United States is neither Russia nor England; it is the land of poor man's hope, and I pray it will ever be. Greatness can come from any environment in our country. David Skinner does not happen to be my own uncle, but he is my mother's uncle, and I have always been proud to call him that. He is the kind of skipper who in the War of 1812 made it unhealthy to stop and search our ships—the kind who overthrew the Barbary pirates when they had the whole world cowed."

"His ship was never out of order at all, I suppose. He kept it in Sitka for any use you might have for it."

"It wasn't very seriously damaged, that's certain. Jeff, instead of muttering in your throat, you ought to be jumping up and down with joy to think that he got away, that day in the inside passage. Those skins are as safe as if they are in a bank."

"Of course, I know what it means to me. I hope I'm a patriot at last, but at least I'm human, and I'm only too glad to take the spoils of war. It means more than you perhaps realize: re-establishment of a home I loved, in my own country. We people in the Southland knew what home-love is."

"I know you do, Jeff," the girl told him, rather softly. "I believe I know how you feel."

"I'm not muttering in my throat. I am only embarrassed and humbled and mortified beyond any words to express. I don't blame you for not telling me sooner. I didn't deserve to know. I can't even blame you for the hell of fear you gave me last night, when you could have relieved me with one word. I got just what was coming to me for my patronizing air during those early weeks, my grand ways and my disparagement of you. I can't see why you continued to help me; why you didn't drop me like the cad I was."

“You weren’t a cad. Your heart was in the right place, all the time. You were embittered by the terrible ordeal and disaster of the Civil War—like so many of your people—and you leaned on false ideas to keep from being utterly crushed. All you needed was readjustment, I wanted to tell you last night, but something—pride, I guess—kept me from it.”

“I’m glad you didn’t tell me. It was all a valuable lesson to me. And I’m glad I told *you*—what I did tell you—before I found all this out. So you know I was genuine in that, at least.”

The miracle light that he had seen and loved now and again—in hushed, glorious hours—welled once more in her eyes. “I’m glad of that, too, Jeff,” she confessed. “I can’t tell you how glad I am. Your love was too great and fine for any folly to come between. I will never cease to give thanks for that.”

“I want you to tell me one thing more, Molly—something you’ve kept from me a long time. I know why you kept it—you didn’t want me to be under any more obligation to you than I already was—and I’m sure, now, and have been sure a long time, that you know the real explanation. How did it happen that Karl got the empty gun, and I the loaded one, that day on the Kolosh Ryeka trail. I don’t believe for a moment that Staritsa got them mixed in their case.”

“No.” The girl smiled into his eyes. “He was very careful—indeed, he was altogether too careful. That was what wakened my suspicions.”

“What did you do?”

“I kept my eyes open, Jeff. I wanted to come with you especially to watch out for treachery. I saw him holding the case like a basket of eggs, careful not to turn it about in his hands, and I was sure he meant a certain pistol for you, and a certain one for Karl. Just to be sure, I walked close, and, watching my chance, simply turned the case around on the ground.”

“Oh, that was all!” Jeff remarked, making a funny face. “You certainly trifled away your time.”

“There is just one thing I want distinctly understood,” Jeff remarked, after a significant and very pleasant pause. “When you are the mistress of my house, I want you to forget that you are a capable and industrious Yankee and become—just a sweetheart. Hereafter I want to run things to suit myself. When there is something to be done, in the future, I want to be the one to do it. I expect to be the important member of our household.”

“So you shall, Jeff, so you shall.” She kissed him without warning. “You have been the important one all the way through, Jeff, my dearest. I just suggested things to you.” Her tone now became serious. “Except for you, the big thing we have tried to do up here would never have come to pass, and that is truth if I ever spoke it. Up there in the woods you came into your own.”

“Just the same, I want to make a few suggestions from now on—by my own self. I suggest now that you walk straight into my arms and do just what you did a moment ago.”

She obeyed—like the dutiful wife she soon would be.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Seward's Folly*, by Edison Marshall.]