

THE LOBSTICK TRAIL

DOUGLAS LEADER DURKIN



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THE LOBSTICK TRAIL

BY

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"The Heart of Cherry McBain"
Etc.



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The Lobstick Trail

CHAPTER I.

One morning in particular had always stood out in the memory of Kirk Brander. The night before had been a big night—there had been a cabaret and drinks and girls and a drunken home-coming in the gray spring dawn. For Kirk had just turned twenty-three, and a half dozen of his boon companions had taken advantage of the occasion to assemble and paint the town its traditional hue in his honor.

The next morning, much against his own will in the matter, he had been forced by a custom unbroken in the house of his uncle and guardian to appear as usual for breakfast. Kirk's attempts at eating would have appeared pathetic to some—to his uncle they were funny. In fact, his uncle had enjoyed the humor of the situation without speaking for so long that Kirk had begun to fear he was on the point of losing his self-control. He could have borne with anything except his uncle's good-humored silence.

When the tension was at its highest point, however, relief came. With a kind of bitter satisfaction Kirk saw the cynical smile disappear almost suddenly from his uncle's face. He saw the heavy countenance drop. He saw the straight, thin line of the mouth tighten. His good old uncle—the only man in the world he had ever sincerely admired—was going to run true to form. And Kirk set himself for the shock. He knew that his old Uncle Hal could do that kind of thing to the king's taste.

Henry Tyne—Kirk Brander's uncle on his mother's side—held strong opinions on young men in general, his young nephew in particular. Though he resented it keenly, Kirk had been forced frequently to admit that the old man was substantially correct. On this one morning in particular, the admission, somehow or other, seemed to come easily. It suited his mood exactly. When he found himself alone after the worst grueling he had ever

had the honor to receive at his uncle's hands, he felt as if a new light had broken in upon him. True, he had experienced something of the same feeling before, but it had never come to him so vividly. He was everything the old man had called him, and more. What he had heard differed little, if any, from what he had heard a score of times before; but it was as if he had just listened to it for the first time in his life.

But all this had happened nearly five years ago. For five years Kirk Brander had kept so constantly in mind a resolve he had made that morning that it had grown into a grim determination that refused to acknowledge defeat, even when the odds were overwhelmingly against him. For five years he had given himself to the stern business of making a man of himself. For five years he had studied the ways of Canada's northland and had striven to accustom himself to its hard usages. He had learned to sleep, as he had never slept before, wherever night should overtake him on the trail, had learned to relish his self-prepared meal of fried bacon and beans far more heartily than he had ever relished the most tempting selection of fare from the menus of over-priced cabarets in the cities of the east. And he had taken to it all, for the most part, with light-hearted enthusiasm.

Only once in those five years had he come near quitting. After a summer spent in The Pas—a northern Manitoba frontier town—he had gone into the woods with an experienced young northerner, a French-Canadian by the name of Walter Lamonte. “Wally” was at least half French. The other half was Scotch with a strain of Cree. He had pushed his way for twenty years through Canada's hinterland, had shot rapids where no white man had ever been seen, had hunted and trapped, and laughed and fought his way through everything with a good humor that had never failed him. When Kirk and Lamonte first met they had found each other amusing. Before they had known each other a month they had become the best of friends. And when the snow fell they took the trail together and went into the wilds to trap. From Lamonte Kirk learned how to keep a dog-team in the trail, how to build a cabin, how to set out a line of traps, and the hundred and one tricks of woodcraft that twenty years in the wilds had taught the young French-Canadian.

The end of the friendship had been as sudden as it was sickeningly tragic. Lamonte had gone out for supplies and had left Kirk alone in the cabin. The strenuous days of Kirk's first winter in the northern wilds had done much to put iron into his will, but the constant struggle against the elements had made it necessary for him to keep all his physical forces in the

field at once. He had found little opportunity for building a reserve. Lamonte had left him suffering from a bad cold, and during the days that immediately followed his departure Kirk began to grow unreasonably anxious for his return. When the time for his arrival had passed without his putting in an appearance Kirk's anxiety increased to a fear that persisted in spite of his determination to throw it off. Two days later, unable to stand the suspense any longer, he had risen from his bed in the early morning and dressed for the trail. Something, he felt, was coming over him gradually, had been coming over him, in fact, for days. When he got from his bed and started to prepare breakfast the thought of eating nauseated him. His face felt unnaturally hot. When he stepped from the doorway of the cabin on his way out to look for Lamonte, the first light breeze seemed to strike through his wind-proof parka and sent the chills to his very bones.

Just before noon that day he found Lamonte. The dogs were nowhere in evidence. The supplies were still on the cariole untouched. A few blackened embers lay in a little heap on the sheltered side of a tarpaulin that hung from the branches of a couple of trees. And sitting erect in the snow only a few yards away, his rifle sticking upright in a drift beside him, was the lifeless, frozen form of Walter Lamonte, his hands and arms and part of his face eaten away, either by his own dogs or by wolves. Kirk had come upon him suddenly and the sight sickened him horribly. He did not wait to seek any explanation of what he had found. The fear that had haunted him for days swooped down over him like an icy spectre and he hurried off down the trail, insanely reckless of where he was going, his hands pressed to his eyes to keep out the memory of what he had seen.

Late that night "Tuck" Roberts, a big southerner whose cabin stood some twenty or thirty miles to the westward, came across Kirk plunging blindly through the deep snow and muttering incoherently to himself. With some difficulty Roberts persuaded him to come to his cabin and there Kirk had remained until the spring break-up.

When he had recovered sufficient strength to permit of his travelling, Roberts took him out to The Pas. For the first time since he had left the east Kirk felt himself thoroughly beaten. For the first time, too, he wrote his uncle acknowledging again the wisdom of his guardian's verdict delivered the morning after his was twenty-three. By the time his uncle's reply came he was almost himself again and had all but forgotten his desire to get back to the comforts and pleasures of his home in the city. When the desire did arise—as it was more or less bound to do periodically during his convalescence—he thought of Tuck Roberts and poor old Wally Lamonte

and then thought of the old companions he had left behind him a year before. He thought, too, of the clear blue in the eyes of Ruth Mackay—and others of her kind in the little northern frontier town—and he confessed to himself that there were no eyes like those anywhere in the memories that came to him from the streets of the city. He had grown to love the north in spite of its ruthlessness. Even as he waited for the return of full vigor there came the songs of the men going off down the Saskatchewan now clear of ice, the rhythmic sweep of their oars, the light vigorous stroke of their gleaming paddles, the sight of a great river stretching its sinuous length under the open skies, and everywhere the silent wooing of the heart of the wild.

There followed a northland summer with the return of the waterfowl and the fluttering into life of poplars and birches and the upward pushing of the reeds along the waterways. Kirk and Tuck went in together to prospect for gold and copper. Each day came with its own struggles against the wild forces in nature, each day with its supreme desires—and each night with its reckoning up of victory or defeat. He had watched while other men, stronger in limb than he, took defeat and went at it again. He had seen men lose their season's supplies in an unlucky miscalculation of a moment while they battled waistdeep against the rapids in a river or were caught unawares in a sudden wind upon the lake. He had more than once said good-bye to men who had gone in to seek out the hidden riches of the earth and had never come back. He had come within a hair's breadth of losing his own life on at least a half dozen occasions. But he had played a man's full part and had taken his knocks without a whimper. He had taken and given measure for measure whether he bargained with nature or man. He had proven to himself that he could take up a man's task and see it through.

Now, at the end of his fifth year in the north, Kirk was going down to the Pas alone with his dogs and his cariole filled with furs—and in his mind a new resolve. In five years he had gained all that he had come north to gain—a consciousness that he could be of some good in the world after all. Having done that there seemed to be nothing left for him in the north. He had managed to build up a tidy account in the bank at The Pas. He could go back east with a clear conscience, meet with a clear eye the shrewd gaze of his old Uncle Hal, strike his hand in a clasp that would bring the old man to a physical sense of his fitness, and take his place in life alongside the best of them.

For with all the love he had conceived for the life he had lived for five years, he could not quite shake himself free of the feeling that, after all, it

had been five years of exile. For months he had been the victim of a homesickness that he could not overcome. He wanted to see his old uncle again, he wanted to see people, he wanted—he could not clearly define the vague upwelling of desire within his heart. He was most conscious of it when he allowed his mind to dwell upon the eyes of Ruth Mackay. He had thought much lately about the women he had known before coming north, of their soft eyes and the lustre of their hair, and often, too, of the deep significance of womanhood—and the admissions he had made secretly to himself brought him no sense of shame or self-consciousness. His blood was clean, his body knit of fibre woven in God's out-of-doors, his mind fashioned under a clear sky in a land of wide horizons. In short, Kirk Brander was going out now for the last time because the life that was in him impelled him to go. He would never come back over that trail again. He would tell that to Tuck at the first opportunity.

He spoke once sharply to his dogs and jerked his cariole quickly to one side. The dogs came willingly enough to a standstill and waited frisking their arched tails slowly as they turned their heads toward him. For two days they had fought their way through a March blizzard in which it was almost impossible to keep one's bearings. The wind had dropped during the afternoon and the sun had gone down in a sky that promised fair weather. The air was still filled with fine particles of snow that drifted down from the spruce and tamaracs and glistened faintly in the failing light. Kirk knew that within an hour he would emerge at last from the seemingly endless miles of tree-sheltered trail and drop down to the smooth windswept level of the Saskatchewan. Ten or twelve miles of river trail and he would be at The Pas, the foremost outpost of civilization in northern Manitoba. Then the hilarious reunions, the good cheer of crowded rooms, the luxury of long lazy days and nights with snug quarters and piping hot meals.

During the five years that Kirk Brander had spent in the north, he had come in over practically the same trail a score of times or more, his gray huskies panting their way through miles of ill-broken or wholly trackless expanses of snow, his cariole weighted down with its freight of raw furs, his heart more hungry than he would have cared to admit for the warmth of a stout hand-clasp and the cordial glow of a human face. But now, with his new resolve burning within him, his mood was strangely different. He looked about him while his dogs rested, looked about at the low hills and the skies and the dusky woodland where the darkness was already setting in. In another month it would be spring and the old longing, he knew, would be back upon him. Of one thing he was certain. He must leave the north while the ice was still on the river, while the snow was still deep in the trail—or he

would not have the will power to go at all. For he knew that spring would bring back with it the soft allurements and the gentle wooings, the swinging songs and the laughing of men, the greening forests and the browning earth —and he knew only too well what his heart would bid him do.

Quickly he turned his face towards the north. He took a half dozen steps slowly along the trail his cariole had just marked in the snow. He tossed back the hood of his parka and listened. The stillness was like death itself. Suddenly he straightened himself and smiled.

“Never again!” he said aloud as he looked about him in the gathering darkness. “Never again, you white-faced, bare-fanged, snarling desert of exile! Never again!”

He hurried back to his cariole, tossed it into position and with a sharp whistle flung out his long-lashed dog whip, making it crack in mid-air with the report of a rifle.

“Wh-s-s-s-t! Hi, you! Bingo! Tip! Snap! Mush!”

Half an hour later they swung at a merry gallop down the high bank of the Saskatchewan and came to the hard, wind-beaten level of the river.

CHAPTER II.

The group of men who crowded the large square room of Wu Long's "Northern Lights" restaurant had come in, with one or two exceptions, during the past forty-eight hours from distant and widely separated points in the north. They had not met for weeks, the majority of them had not been out since the first real snowfall of the season, and now it was the middle of March. Similar groups might have been found crowding other places in the town, for hundreds of prospectors and trappers and men from the lumber camps had been arriving during the entire week to be on hand for the annual dog Derby.

For the past twenty-four hours interest in the coming dog race had given way temporarily before an unexpected announcement that had been made by Jim Cavanagh, the provincial constable. Two crimes in the northland are regarded as even worse than murder. There may be some reason for killing a man, though now-a-days the reason must be a good one, but no one has any reason either for stealing furs or for running off with another man's dogs. And Jim Cavanagh had given out the news that the warehouse of the Hudson's Bay Company had been broken open and bales of fur to the value of twenty thousand dollars removed.

The door opened and Phil Roche stepped into the room accompanied by a half-breed, Joe Bedard. Joe closed the door and turned to talk with the half-breed girl who stood behind the glass case that served as a counter. Phil Roche walked to the middle of the room and paused before Tuck Roberts, who was busy arguing with old man Dags.

"They've got the loot!" he announced abruptly.

Roche's tall form was clad in a dark green mackinaw, his trousers tucked into heavy woollen socks. On his feet he wore moccassins of beaded buckskin and on his large head a fox-skin cap, the thick flaps of which hung loosely about his ears.

The men pressed forward eagerly for news.

"Old Jimmy found the stuff cached in the woods the other side of the railway, under two feet of snow—all there—dead easy! Whoever did that job sure bungled it."

“Any clue?” Dags asked briefly.

“They’ve got enough,” Roche replied.

“Ye-h?” Old man Dags seemed to be only casually interested in anything Roche could say.

“Jimmy won’t talk but—he’ll talk later. I’d call it fast work—fast even for Jimmy—but anyone can work fast on a job as crude as that one.”

As Roche turned to go Dags’ eyes followed him and a look almost cynical passed slowly over the old man’s face. Roche paused near the door.

“No word from Brander yet?” he said looking back towards Tuck Roberts.

“Not yet,” Tuck replied and Roche went out alone.

“The son of a dog did that job himself,” Dags suddenly said to Tuck when the door had closed.

“Dags!” Tuck exclaimed.

For answer Dags looked Tuck over once without smiling.

“Young fellow,” he said turning more directly to Tuck and speaking so quietly that he could not be heard above the din except by Tuck, “I’m older than you are—just about forty years older—an’ it won’t hurt you a damn’ bit to listen to a man some older. You can’t trust a bad dog—an’ when you ain’t lookin’ he’s goin’ to bite. Now, look out!”

Dags was by a long way the oldest man in the room. He had come to The Pas when the first news of gold in the district had trickled out and found its way into the newspapers. Who he was or where he hailed from, no man really knew. On one occasion, Tuck Roberts, in an irrepressible mood, had boldly asked the old man what his real name was. Dags had been more communicative than usual, a fact that was due in large measure, no doubt, to his having imbibed more freely than usual of a favorite though rather poor grade of whisky. But Dags, drunk or sober, never forgot himself. He had sobered perceptibly at Tuck’s question and had looked his questioner over for a full minute before making a reply.

“My name, young fellow, is Dags—just Dags.”

“Yes, but—but Dags who—or what?” Tuck had persisted.

“Dags nothin’—plain Dags—Mister Dags! Ain’t that enough?”

And Dags had remained as he was—just Dags—plain Dags—*Mister* Dags, if one happened to be more than usually polite.

But Tuck had always liked the old fellow. And he liked him now as he stood there beside him, his scant five-feet-nine reduced even further by a decided stoop, his chin pushed forward sharply, his narrow, half-shut eyes squinting oddly in the dim light of the room.

Of some twenty entries in the dog Derby two men shared honors pretty evenly as favorites. One was Tuck himself who had left his traps a full month before the race in order to get his dogs into the very best condition possible for the test. His good fortune of the year before when he had won first money by arriving not more than thirty seconds ahead of Phil Roche had made him a notable favorite among the men. This year he had taken the same dogs, a beautifully matched team of white-faced huskies, heavy enough to stand the gruelling that a hundred miles of racing would impose, but trained to a condition that was likely to develop all the speed they were capable of making, if the race should have to be decided, as had been the case the year before, in the last half mile.

Tuck's chief opponent, it was generally agreed, was Phil Roche. He had made Tuck extend himself to the very limit at the finish of the previous race. This year it was generally felt that Tuck had even more to fear from Roche. While the former had talked freely of the coming race and of his dogs, Roche had remained consistently secretive about his preparations. Joe Bedard, the well-known and generally disliked half-breed of the place, was the only man in town who knew anything of Roche's preparations—but Joe was no talker. To him Roche had entrusted a large share of the burden of the preparations, and no one doubted for a moment that those preparations would be complete to the last detail.

Tuck shook off the effect of Dags' remarks and turning to the old fellow smiled pleasantly.

"I'm not worrying about the race, Dags," he remarked. "I only wish the prize was for five thousand instead of two."

Dags grunted. "Too bad wishes ain't yellow, Tuck," he replied. "We could paint old Paxton's holdin's so they'd look like a bloomin' sunset!"

Tuck smiled affably and busied himself with rolling a cigarette.

There came a sudden flurry without and the door flew open revealing the parka-clad figure of Kirk Brander outlined against the darkness, the spare

gray forms of his dogs faintly visible in the dim light that fell from the doorway.

“Wh-s-s-s-t—bing!”

He whistled sharply and tossing his long whip-lash into the middle of the floor jerked his hand back quickly, raising the ashes beside the stove into a little cloud about the legs of Dags.

The old man, whether the movement was prompted by affection or by the sudden crack of the whip-lash within a few inches of his feet, sprang towards Kirk where he stood laughing in the doorway. But before Dags could reach him, Kirk’s eyes had spotted Tuck Roberts farther back in the room. In a moment the two young fellows were together near the centre of the room, first in a violent handshake from which they broke suddenly into a rough-and-tumble sparring match in which both laughed as they gave and received blows on the side of the head that would have sent an ordinary man to the floor. When they finally closed and with their arms about each other started a nondescript dance that forced the others in the room to jump back from their flying heels, a half dozen of the men, one of whom was Dags himself, rushed in and tore the two apart.

Kirk’s eyes fell first upon Dags.

“Hello, Dagsie, old boy!” he cried and catching him by the arms lifted the old fellow quite clear of the floor.

But Kirk’s greetings were to be shared by more than Tuck Roberts and old man Dags. Kirk Brander was like a brother come back to them all, and in a moment he was the centre of a small but noisy mob of men fighting for an opportunity to shake his hand.

Nor was there anything either in his smiling face or in the deep good nature that his whole bearing radiated that the best man and the shrewdest man among them could not have trusted to the limit. It was very much as old Dags had once said of him—“A straight man couldn’t pick a scrap with Kirk Brander, and a crooked one wouldn’t take the chance.” His shoulders had broadened and his frame had reached up during his five years in the open until now he was as perfect a specimen physically as the eye could wish to see. In his stride as he passed from place to place in the room among the men there was an ease, a jauntiness even, that was eloquently expressive of his own lightness of heart. The hood of his parka lay back revealing thick hair of a deep auburn that in some way or other seemed exactly to fit his wonted jovial manner.

Even Wu Long waddled in from the kitchen with his broad smile and broken words of welcome.

“Hi, there, Wu—you old ketchem glub artist,” Kirk cried as he stepped towards the grinning proprietor and shook his hand. “Hurry out and fetch me a big cup of black coffee!”

Wu grinned even more broadly at the recognition his humble presence had received and waddled away quickly in the direction of the kitchen to attend personally to Kirk’s order.

But Tuck Roberts was already emerging from behind the swinging door that opened between the large room and the kitchen. In his hand he carried a large glass more than half full of a liquid that, in color at least, resembled tea more than coffee.

“A little something to warm your blood, Kirk,” he said, thrusting the glass into Kirk’s hand.

Kirk looked at it a moment and then held it up between himself and the light.

“This is too stiff for me, Tuck,” he said smiling, “and besides—when I do take a drink I like company.”

In a moment a dozen glasses and cups were ready. Kirk poured almost half the contents of his own glass into the empty cup that Dags held, and half of what still remained into the glass held by Tuck Roberts. He added water to his own while the others in the group prepared to join in the toast. When they were ready all turned their eyes upon Kirk.

For a moment he stood thoughtfully looking into his glass. Then his eyes lifted and moved slowly from face to face, dwelling a moment on each as if he wished to stamp its image on his memory.

“To the men who live north of fifty-three,” he said quietly, “and to the last week of Kirk Brander’s stay among the best friends he ever had!”

He did not raise his glass immediately. The men stood motionless and stared at him.

“Quit your spoofing, Kirk,” said Tuck.

“Honest Injun!” Kirk replied. “I’m going to end my happy exile and go back again to live among the—the Philistines and the false prophets.”

“Which same allusion ain’t precisely correct,” remarked Dags with a touch of dry humor.

“Philistines or Pharisees, Dagsie,” Kirk replied, “what’s the difference? I never was strong on religious distinctions. But I’m going out, boys, surer than jackfish for malamutes—and I’m not coming back any more.”

Kirk raised his glass.

“I’m not in on that toast, Kirk,” said Tuck suddenly. “You’ve got to take it back.”

Kirk looked at him and smiled.

“You’re right, Tuck,” he said laying his hand on Tuck’s shoulder. “I should have talked it over with you first—that’s what I intended. How’s this?”

He raised his glass again.

“To the good old dog on the heavy trail—and the man that never quits!”

When they had drunk the toast. Tuck Roberts turned suddenly to Kirk.

“Now give us the straight dope on this prodigal son stuff,” he demanded.

“I hate to say it, Tuck, but I’m going out,” Kirk replied.

“Quit it!” Tuck responded.

Old Dags was within earshot. “Why not?” he demanded and the whine in his voice was even more pronounced. “We don’t have to inhabit the whole infernal globe, Tuck, just because it’s here,” he declared. “There ain’t no race that’s bred to it except Eskimos and huskie-dogs. An’ I say leave it to them—it’s their country—let ’em keep it!”

“He’s had it for three days,” Tuck explained to Kirk. “If someone doesn’t get him out of town, he’ll make the dog Derby look like an old aunt’s funeral.”

Kirk turned to Dags.

“Cheer up, you old Lazarus,” he said playfully. “Some day we’re all going to wake up in these parts. We’ve been dead to the world, and, if you don’t look out someone from outside will be coming in and cleaning us out.”

“Out o’ what?” Dags whined.

“Out of what!” Kirk exclaimed. “Don’t you know that for two hundred and fifty years Canadians have been puddling along on the southern rim of a country as rich as any country in the world and have handed the rest of it over to a company of moneyed Englishmen who never saw Canada and don’t give a tinker’s dam if they ever do or not. But we’ve got to pull in our

belts, Dagsie. God Almighty's going to give Canada the next hundred years to make good in, an' she's got to make good by herself or forget about it and let someone else handle the deal. We've got enough fish in the lakes north of the Saskatchewan to feed the rest of the world week-days and Fridays. There's more good salmon in the Hudson Bay than they ever dreamed of in Alaska or British Columbia. There's enough water power here in one province to turn every wheel, light every house and every street in every village, town and city from Halifax to Vancouver. There's timber and stone and minerals—why, God bless my soul, it isn't a question of whether the stuff's here or not. It's a question of whether we're packing the kind of stuff here"—and he placed his hand over his belt—"that'll handle the deal. That's where we stand!"

The men had all been listening to Kirk's enthusiastic outbreak and a deep silence followed when his voice suddenly ceased.

From near the stove came the voice of old Dags: "An' you can put them words down to the credit of Kirk Brander—young but well-meanin'."

"Come on, Dagsie," replied Kirk, "give us a chance to be happy. I'll drink another—just a very little one—"

He lifted a glass, poured it half full of water from a pitcher that stood on the table beside him and raised it.

"To the success of the Derby," he said. "Hats off to a fair race and a good one—and may Tuck Roberts run the best race of his life."

The men bared their heads and filling their glasses drank facing Kirk. Just as he was about to raise his glass, Kirk's eyes fell upon Joe Bedard still lounging lazily against the counter near the door. He was not drinking and his hat was on his head.

"Hats off, Joe!" Kirk called in a voice that was not unpleasant, though it rang with a clear note of determination.

For answer the half-breed got up lazily and, without showing any intention of complying with the request, moved towards the door. When his hand was on the latch, Kirk took a quick step forward. His right hand went back quickly as he seized the butt of the whip that dangled on a thong about his wrist. With a quick movement, he shook loose the long lash from where he had caught it up about the handle. When the end dropped to the floor, he drew his hand forward slowly, his eyes fixed steadily on Bedard's cap. Every inch of the whip-lash seemed, as if by magic, to become charged with life. It moved along the floor like a writhing snake and then suddenly, as Kirk's

hand snapped back, it leaped from the floor through the swirling dust and shot towards the half-breed's head. When it leaped back suddenly with a deafening report, Bedard's cap rose straight into the air and went spinning to the floor a couple of yards from Kirk's feet.

For a moment Bedard's face was ablaze with anger. Kirk looked at him steadily, a half smile playing about his mouth. Then he drank what was in his glass and stepping forward stooped good-naturedly and picked the cap up from the floor. For a moment he stood looking it over carefully. Then he brushed the dust from it and handed it back to Bedard.

"Too bad, Joe," he said in the best of good humor. "Tuck's my friend—that's all."

When Kirk reached the hotel late that night he was met by the hotel clerk who flourished a yellow envelope in his hand.

Kirk took the telegram eagerly and tore it open. It was from his uncle.

"Get in touch with Marion Curtis arriving The Pas to-morrow. Act on her instructions. Show speed and look out for W. K. P.

HENRY TYNE."

For a long time Kirk stood reading the message over and over. The name of Marion Curtis started vague memories—memories of the life he had lived in those almost forgotten days before he had come north. Was that life, then, coming in to meet him even before he returned?

CHAPTER III.

The rear coach of "The Tamarac"—the local name for the Canadian National train from Winnipeg to The Pas—was filled to capacity with Derby enthusiasts.

In one corner of the smoking compartment Warren K. Paxton had been holding forth for some time on the future of the north country. He glanced from the window suddenly and got up.

"Drop into my office," he said to the man whose attention he had engaged for the past hour. "You'll be staying over for the Derby. Drop in and smoke a cigar."

He handed his companion a card which bore the information that Warren K. Paxton was sole representative of the Ripple Creek Copper Mining Company, with an office on the main street of The Pas.

"Come in when you get through with your business. Glad to see you any time."

He shook hands and tossing away what remained of his cigar, left the smoking compartment and went back into the coach.

Warren K. Paxton was not an unpleasant man to look upon, if one did not observe too closely the almost mockingly patronizing expression that never left his countenance. At first glance one would think that Paxton was smiling to himself, agreeably too. A closer look would reveal the sneer to which the smile was little more than a very thin veneer. And once one saw that sneer he never again saw the smile. When Paxton really smiled he showed his teeth—and they were neither good nor even. If by any chance one should miss the suggestion of largeness about Paxton it would probably be because he had a way of looking at one through cold gray eyes that permitted no one to think of him merely as a large man. His look had the cutting, incisive quality more often found in the eyes of smaller and more energetic men. Warren K. Paxton knew precisely what he wanted, and could tell, at any given time, just about how long it would be before he would get it.

He went to his seat and busied himself for a few moments with putting a magazine into a capacious club-bag. From all outward appearances he had

no concern in the world other than putting away a worthless magazine that he would not look at again anyhow. But the real truth of the matter was that Paxton was still turning over something that had occupied his mind ever since he had stepped on board “The Tamarac” at Winnipeg. And now with only a few minutes left of the journey to The Pas he was as far away as ever from a satisfactory solution to his problem.

The question that was vexing Paxton’s mind—it had kept him awake and thinking most of the night—was why in the devil a certain woman who had no interest whatever in dog-racing should be going to The Pas on the same train with the Derby crowd.

The woman who had been the cause of his sleeplessness was only three seats away as he stood fussing with his club-bag. She was taller than the average, two or three years under thirty, very attractive physically, and with a tilt to her head that was almost maddening to Paxton. Though she was dressed in a rather short, tight-fitting skirt that displayed a very trim ankle and neatly booted foot, one’s attention was attracted more by her head with its mass of black hair riotous above dark eyes that were generously arched and filled with pride. With her was an English maid who obeyed the commands of her mistress and studied her every whim as if she had been trained to little else from childhood.

Paxton knew Marion Curtis, had known her for a number of years in fact. He had known her as a young woman before she had married Trueman Curtis. He had known her even better since the untimely death of her husband had sent her out into the business world to shift for herself.

He closed his club-bag with a very resolute snap and stood out in the aisle. Then quickly he turned and walked forward in the car. Three seats away he paused and turned his broad and ingratiating smile upon the woman who had occupied his attention.

“I didn’t know you were interested in dog-racing, Mrs. Curtis,” he said in an effort to open a pleasant form of conversation.

“Oh, how do you do, Mr. Paxton,” she returned sweetly, offering her hand. “You never can tell what a woman may find interesting. We never know that ourselves.”

“I believe it,” Paxton replied.

“But I assure you I am interested in dog-racing—very much so, indeed.”

Her accent was soft but carried a note that made her appear thoroughly at ease in the world.

"I suppose, then, you're betting heavily on the outcome," he continued with an attempt at humor.

"Oh, my, no—not heavily, at any rate. I wouldn't mind placing a wager after I get there and find out something about the conditions."

"Well," Paxton offered, "I have a little loose change left. Let me know when you're ready."

"Fine—I will!" she replied with enthusiasm. "Are you a good loser, Mr. Paxton?"

"Always—to a lady," he replied.

"Then, by George, I'm going to try you out!" she laughed.

The harmless little expletive with which she adorned her last speech came rather explosively from between lips that were a little too tight and perhaps a little too thin. Warren K. Paxton didn't like those lips. He didn't like the chin, either, that seemed to come forward just a trifle when she spoke. There was a challenge there and although Paxton could not but admire the woman who gave it, neither could he forget that he had lost a good night's sleep because of it.

He looked at her now and tried to estimate the significance of what he saw in her face. He had known Marion Curtis for nearly five years and always when in her company he had found himself dropping unavoidably into the habit of estimating her.

"Do you know, Marion Curtis," he said abruptly, "I've had dealings of various kinds with you ever since your husband died—and before—but I find you just as inscrutable as ever."

She laughed heartily.

"Mr. Paxton, you are positively funny. This is at least the third time you have said that very thing to me."

Paxton tried, with little success, to conceal his embarrassment.

"The third and last time," he replied, "and I hope you take no offence at what I say."

"Oh, no—no!" The finality with which she dismissed any such possibility was very characteristic. It was not at all necessary for her to wave it aside with a little sweep of her hand nor to tilt her chin very perceptibly—though she did both—to give the impression she evidently desired to give. The tone of her voice was quite sufficient.

Paxton found himself in even greater difficulties.

“I’m a clumsy joker, Mrs. Curtis. My friends know that and just put up with it.” At last he seemed on the point of regaining his wonted coolness. “The fact is, Marion Curtis, you’d be a very agreeable sort of woman if you weren’t so damned anxious to dominate everyone about you!”

The words came suddenly and with a bluntness that was almost a surprise even to Paxton himself. His smile now did full service as veneer. Marion Curtis looked at him once with eyes that went far beneath the smile. Then she laughed at him again.

“Do you know, Mr. Paxton, you’ve said that to me before, too? And besides—you said you were a good loser. Surely you wouldn’t object to being dominated by a woman.”

“I resent the suggestion—decidedly,” Paxton replied in his best humor. “Not even by a good looking woman.”

After all, he thought to himself as he walked away, Marion Curtis was a devilishly attractive woman with a quick brain and a quick tongue—and she had a way with her. If she could only be taught to keep her place in the world he could find a great deal in the woman to admire.

But that was precisely what Marion Curtis could not or would not be taught. In fact, she didn’t seem to have the vaguest idea of what kind of place a woman should fill in life. During the brief three years that she had been the wife of Trueman Curtis she had quietly reclaimed her young rake of a husband while society still shook its head sadly over the tragic mistake she had made in marrying him. And then one morning the world awoke to find him one of the most successful young lawyers in the city with a political career opening straight before him. His sudden death had left Marion Curtis a widow at twenty-five and without many serious regrets.

She had mourned the death of young Curtis neither very long nor very deeply. Marion Curtis was at heart a gambler—a gambler with an unbreakable will of her own. She had married Trueman Curtis partly out of pity for a man who was consistently and uninterruptedly making an ass of himself. The temptation to take him in hand and make him over was too great for her to resist. The fact that a Higher Power had stepped in before her work was complete had hurt her pride more than anything else. And Marion Curtis was very proud. She had relied upon pride when she went out to meet the world after Curtis had been taken out of her life forever. Now, nearly three years later, she was proud in the knowledge that she had never been beaten and in the confidence that she never would be.

The station platform was filled with a motley northern crowd such as one might expect to see at a carnival or a masquerade ball. Men in picturesque caribou parkas decorated with bright ribbons of all colors and bound about with long tasselled scarfs stood by smoking in silence as they watched the visitors descend from the train. There were girls, too, in beaded moccasins and brightly colored coats and toques, their warm breaths whitening into little clouds in the crisp air. Back against the wall of the station-house itself stood an irregular line of Indians and an occasional squaw hunched into a black shawl, all alike interested in the new arrivals but showing never a sign of it in their dark faces.

Marion Curtis stepped down lightly to the platform and shook her shoulders briskly as she drew her first deep breath of northern air. Warren K. Paxton stood only a few feet away doing his best to smile amiably.

"It's cold up here but you don't feel it," he said jocularly.

"I think it's positively wonderful!" she replied with enthusiasm.

"Wonderful—good Lord!" Paxton exclaimed. "Marion Curtis, you're unconscious—you're freezing to death—that's what's the matter. Do you notice a sleepy feeling creeping over you. That's a sure sign."

She did not reply at once. She gave no sign even that she had caught his little joke. Her eyes were fixed on a marvellous team of five black and gray huskies and their driver standing leisurely beside them, one hand on the head of his big lead-dog, the other toying with a long whip.

"I don't think I was ever more awake in my life, Mr. Paxton," she declared without shifting her gaze. "Did you ever see such wonderful dogs?"

Paxton turned to look in the direction she indicated.

"Huh! You've picked the prize team of the north country. Don't put any money on them, though. They're good looking and they can haul a load, but they haven't the speed."

"By George, I'd rather bet on that team and lose than win a thousand on any other!" she exclaimed.

"You'll find lots to take your money, young woman. Better appoint me your trustee for the duration of the visit. Here—I'll give you the first thrill of your visit, Mrs. Curtis," he said suddenly. "Come along and I'll get him to take you to your hotel. I know him well enough to break the ice—and he's a little different from the rest of them. Come on—I'll be responsible."

He stepped briskly towards the end of the platform and Marion Curtis followed him.

“Came here five years ago—a regular booze artist,” Paxton murmured, half-covering his mouth with one hand and casting his eyes towards the young fellow standing by his dogs. “Cleaned right up—altogether a decent sort of fellow—name’s Brander—Kirk Brander—nephew of old Henry Tyne’s—you know.”

“Kirk Brander?” she asked in surprise. For once Marion Curtis was caught off her guard.

“Yes—you know him?”

“Oh, no—it’s rather a nice name, don’t you think? It seems to me — —”

But they were already beside Kirk and Paxton was busy with the introduction. Marion Curtis extended her hand cordially and smiled. For a moment she experienced a small panic lest Kirk should unwittingly drop a word that might give Paxton further food for thought.

But Kirk’s smile, cordial as it was, revealed nothing and his words bespoke merely the welcome which the northland extended to all its visitors.

Paxton lost no time in suggesting to Kirk that he should drive Marion Curtis to her hotel, and after a few minutes spent in giving directions to her maid she accepted Kirk’s invitation to a seat in his cariole. When he had tucked the robes snugly about her he gave a sharp whistle, flourished his long whip in the air, and the dogs were off.

No word was spoken by either of them as the dogs sped along, down one street after another, towards the centre of the town. Seated in the cariole, Marion Curtis was tasting the joys of her first ride behind a dog-team. Behind her, running close to the end of the cariole, Kirk divided his attention between his dogs and his passenger, who from the first glance she had given him out of her dark eyes, had held a strange but compelling fascination for him.

Kirk had had enough experience in life to know precisely the nature of the appeal which Marion Curtis made to him. As yet he had seen nothing of her dominating business ability except what he had caught in the first look she had given him when they had been introduced by Paxton. Of that he was to know more later. What he knew now was that she was a woman, with a woman’s eyes and a woman’s voice, and the subtle suggestion of sex made him wish he could put his hand out to where she sat beneath him and lay it upon the soft fur that closed snugly about her neck. At the next thought he

almost cursed his uncle. Could it be possible that foxy old Henry Tyne had sent Marion Curtis into the north country simply to lead Kirk back to him?

The suspicion lingered with him still as he drew his dogs to a standstill before the hotel and taking her hand assisted her to her feet and out upon the sidewalk where she stood a moment smiling at him, her cheeks flaming from the ride in the frosty morning air.

Suddenly the smile vanished from her face and her voice assumed a tone that was quite matter-of-fact.

“It was very fortunate to meet you just like this,” she said. “I had wondered a little on the way up just how I should find you without drawing too much attention, especially from our friend, Paxton. You have heard from your uncle?”

Kirk nodded an affirmative.

“Did he tell you anything—anything important.”

“Nothing except that I was to take my instructions from you,” Kirk replied.

“Well, we can’t talk here. You can see me soon? We must have a little talk to explain just why I’ve come. When can you see me?”

“Any time,” Kirk replied, “though perhaps we’d better leave it till after the race.”

“Are you going to run, then?” she asked looking at the dogs.

“No, but I’m interested in a friend of mine who is going to win.”

“You must drop in to see me anyhow before the race. I’d like to make a little bet with Paxton. He seemed keen on getting me into it. I don’t know much about the game—perhaps you could instruct me.”

She turned and was about to go but halted suddenly and looked back at Kirk. As she did so Paxton came swinging down the street. Walking beside him was Phil Roche.

“When I have settled on who the winner’s going to be,” Marion Curtis said when Paxton had come up, “I’ve a hundred or so that I’d like to use just to draw you out.”

“Good!” replied Paxton, “my mind’s settled now.” He put his hand on Phil Roche’s shoulder. “Meet Phil Roche, the winner of the Derby,” he announced by way of introduction.

Marion Curtis bowed and Kirk smiled a little at Paxton's assertion of confidence in his favorite.

"Isn't that right?" Paxton enquired of him.

"I call Tuck Roberts to win," Kirk replied simply.

"For how much?" Paxton asked and Roche stepped closer.

"A thousand, even money."

"And five hundred of mine with it," suddenly put in Marion Curtis.

Paxton and Roche spoke a few words together.

Then, "Done!" said Paxton.

CHAPTER IV.

As Kirk drove down the street he could not help a feeling of something like resentment rising within him—though at whom he was resentful he could not have clearly explained. Marion Curtis, beautiful and compelling, had made the sort of appeal to him that left him annoyed with himself and out of sorts with the world in general.

But even as he thought about it he was aware of someone speaking to him and looking up his eyes met those of Ruth Mackay, soft and smiling and chiding him in their gentleness.

“Dog-gone it, Ruth,” he said, shaking her hand and looking into her dark eyes, “but you’re prettier every time I see you. If you get any better I’m going to shoot Tuck Roberts and run away with you myself.”

Ruth blushed a little and then going to the lead-dog stooped and put her arms about his shaggy neck.

“Dear old Bingo remembers me, too, Kirk,” she cried delightedly. “Oh, he’s a beauty!”

In Ruth Mackay, the only daughter of a retired servant of the Hudson’s Bay Company who had taken to prospecting with abundance of luck, there was the dark strain of Cree blood that came to her from her mother’s side some three generations back. But Kirk had always felt her beauty had been enhanced by it. At any rate Tuck Roberts loved her and Kirk wanted no other prompting. And there was much in the girl’s appearance to justify not only Tuck Roberts but any man in falling in love with her.

Kirk stood for a moment looking down at the two. In the girl’s head with its rich brown hair lying upon her soft neck, and in her face with its large soft brown eyes and full, clear, rounded cheeks there was everything that suggested tenderness and gentleness and woman’s love. In Bingo’s grizzled face, its pointed, tufted ears, its square, broad forehead and wolf-like jaws covered with a mixture of black and gray hair, its white fangs just showing from between his lips on which there was a constant suggestion of a snarl, and its eyes, small, piercing, with a smouldering fire within—there may have been something of fierce beauty in it but it was a face in which no one but the fondest lover of dogs could find the first trace of affection. Kirk had always loved his leader and had always trusted him, too, but he knew that

Bingo was not a dog to be trifled with. And so he treated him always seriously, giving him cause at no time to doubt his mastery.

Kirk stooped to look his dogs over while Ruth stood watching him. From one dog to another he went, lifting their feet in his hands and examining them carefully. When he came finally to Bingo he spent rather longer and scrutinized the soft pads on the dog's feet very closely. In spite of the long journey Bingo's feet were in perfect condition. Kirk ran his fingers up the muscles of the dog's fore-legs and over the shaggy, bulging chest where it showed deep and well to the front between the dog's shoulders.

"Bingo, you old rascal," he said, slapping the dog's shoulders and pulling at the long coarse hair on his neck, "nothing could kill you—nothing, unless too much attention."

He got to his feet.

"Tell your dad I'm coming in to see him soon—and have a big plate of those griddle cakes all ready with a side dish of those red raspberries I helped you pick last summer. Let me call for you and take you down to see the start of the race," he said as he swung his team out into the street again.

"Will you bring the team?" she asked.

"Sure thing. Be ready about five."

He drove away leaving Ruth smiling and waving to him from the sidewalk.

With the race only a few hours away the town was a-stir with flutterings of gossip on the big event. There was a touch almost of spring softness in the air and not a trace was left of the big blizzard that had swept the country three days before, except the huge banks of snow that lay in the streets and blocked the trails where they led in different directions out of town.

The racers themselves were very little in evidence. The element of suspicion does not play a large part among men whose life is lived for the most part in the open, but no man takes a chance in a game where the stakes are worth playing for. Every man spent the day with his dogs and carried out his preparations quietly and unobserved.

At noon the racers came together to meet the Derby committee and hear the chairman read the conditions under which the race was to be run. The course was laid from a point on the river to the house of a trader at Sturgeon Landing, fifty miles away, the race to be run over the full course and back again, finishing at the starting point on the river. A line which marked the

starting and finishing points had already been set and positions at the start were to be drawn for when the teams were ready to take their places. The time set for the start was five minutes after six in the evening and late-comers would have to accept the handicap or drop out of the running.

On one point particularly Bob Harkwell, the chairman, laid special emphasis. "In the event of one team overhauling another and wishing to pass, it was to be understood that only the most sportsmanlike conditions could be tolerated. No obstructions other than those offered naturally by the conditions of the trail over which they were travelling could be countenanced."

"If a man wants to use his whip when another team is trying to pass him," Harkwell explained, "he must throw it low and on the side of his team away from the team that's coming up. Is that clear?"

There was a general murmur of assent and approval.

"By gar," broke in a French half-breed who had entered his team in the race, "I lak see any man t'row de w'ip at my dog. You have to send out an' bring him in—he can't come in alone, that's sure!"

CHAPTER V.

With everything set for the race Kirk left Tuck with his dogs and went back to the hotel. Once in his room he spent a good half hour standing before his window engrossed in his own thoughts. The sky was a perfect winter blue and the sunlight lay warm upon the snow. Straight before him lay the flat white breadth of the river and beyond it the tree-covered wilds that reached on and out to where lay the great silent valleys and the far forgotten hills. His pulse quickened as he gazed and he involuntarily drew a long, deep breath as if he wished to take into his very heart all that lay before him, its majestic beauty, its white expansiveness, its age-long challenge, its mighty spirit.

There was undoubtedly a newly-awakened interest in the limitless possibilities of this great north country. Men of means and the big interests both in Canada and in the United States were turning their eyes in the direction of this, probably the last, unexploited mineral district on the continent. What the ultimate effect of this newly-awakened interest would be time alone could tell. But there was enough of the gambler in Kirk Brander to wish that he might be on hand to watch this new game, the great game where men of means would play strong hands to win big stakes. And as he thought of it all he felt his lately renewed enthusiasm for the big cities somewhat dampened.

He would find Marion Curtis at once and hear her story. If his good old uncle was going to be one of the men in the game, the sooner Kirk Brander, his runaway nephew, learned all there was to know about it the better.

He looked at his watch. It was shortly after three o'clock. He turned abruptly from the window and left the room. In response to his knock, Marion Curtis herself opened her door and greeted him with her rare smile.

"Come in," she said simply. "Do you know I was almost expecting you —hoping you might drop along, at least. I am just going to have a cup of tea."

Kirk entered and allowed his eyes to rest a moment on the white-spread table with its burden of china and refreshments.

"You put me under obligation to you very early in our acquaintance, Mrs. Curtis," Kirk observed.

"You are not quite fair," she reproved him gently. "I'm sure the offering of an innocent cup of tea should not be looked upon so seriously."

"Well, it's mighty good of you, anyhow," Kirk replied, and took the chair which she offered him at the little table.

With a word to her maid she took her place opposite him and prepared to serve the tea.

"Are we prepared to talk business," she asked with a smile, "or is there too much excitement in the air to-day?"

"I shall be governed entirely by your wishes in the matter," Kirk replied.

"I didn't expect to get so gallant a reply from a—a man of the woods," she responded and there was something almost coquettish in her manner as she spoke.

"Gallantry is always a matter of occasion," returned Kirk, "occasion and inspiration."

"Good," she laughed. "Perhaps the individual has something to do with it, too, however. I can't see our big friend—Paxton's favorite—what was his name?"

"Phil Roche," Kirk prompted.

"Yes. I can't see him in the role of a gallant, for instance."

"You have to understand Phil," Kirk protested. "He's not half so bad as he looks. And besides—Phil hasn't had the kind of treatment that is likely to make courtiers of men."

"Oh—a woman there too?"

"Isn't it always so?"

"Well, that may be a matter of opinion," Marion suggested. "Still—tell me about it."

She had begun to pour tea as she spoke and Kirk could not help noticing the softer tone that had crept into her voice. He was not unconscious of her physical beauty as he looked at her but now it was the beauty of her voice that appealed to him, a voice that had grown strangely soft and held nothing of the brusque, matter-of-fact quality that he had associated with her when they had first met that morning.

And so Kirk undertook to tell her the story of Phil Roche and his unfortunate love for Jule Allen, the daughter of old John Allen of the White

Squaw mine. His telling, moreover, was almost an apology for Phil Roche—he believed in giving the devil his due, be the devil never so black.

If one circumstance is sufficient to damn a man's life, then Kirk felt that Phil Roche had a fairly good case. From time to time stray bits of news had gone about concerning a girl who had been seen only three or four times by the trappers and prospectors who explored the northern woods and waterways by winter and summer. Gossip had made the girl surpassingly beautiful—much too beautiful to be true—and scores of strange stories had been invented concerning her origin and her place of residence. Naturally much mystery surrounded her, mystery that was spun for the most part about the warm stoves in such places as Wu Long's restaurant. That invention was frequently overdone might be excused in the light of the fact that for a long time there were very few facts on which to draw for support.

When men have spun a fine mystery for themselves they dislike nothing so much as having it treated rudely. For months it had been accepted as settled that the girl was a white squaw whom the natives of the wilds kept hidden because of her rare beauty. It was a shock, therefore, when it became known that she was none other than Jule Allen, the daughter of the eccentric old Englishman, John Allen. Old man Allen and his daughter had entered the district by way of the Saskatchewan from the west and having once settled in a spot of their own choosing, nestled down and let the rest of the world pass unnoticed. But this discovery produced only a small flutter of surprise compared with the later announcement that Phil Roche had returned from a couple of months' prospecting in the Ripple Creek district with the news that he had met Jule Allen and was going back to take the wood-nymph of the northern wilds for his wife. Roche himself was not generally liked and the thought of his marrying one whose being was something more than human in the minds of the more imaginative produced much discussion that was anything but pleasant. For a couple of weeks they had awaited the appearance of old John Allen in town in the hope that the old Englishman would settle their doubts and allay their fears.

But John Allen did not come. And one day Phil Roche and his near-slave, Joe Bedard, were missing from town and speculation was rife once more. About a week later he returned, accompanied by Bedard—but no bride.

For days Roche refused to answer the pointed enquiries that were directed at him. Bedard seemed not even to hear the questions that were shot at him from every side. When the wise ones began to draw wry faces and put their tongues in their cheeks or wink knowingly when the affair was

mentioned, Phil Roche became at first angry, then frigidly dignified. Finally an old missionary arrived from Cumberland House with a couple of Indians. A few days later the story of Roche's disappointment was being circulated freely among the men.

Roche, it appeared, had arrived at Cumberland House on the appointed day and had gone immediately to the priest in charge of the mission there. In answer to the missionary's questioning look, Roche had told him that the bride-to-be would be on hand sometime during the afternoon. Roche had gone immediately to the shore at a point overlooking the lake and had waited there until evening. About sunset Jule Allen had arrived in a canoe with two Indians and had joined Roche. Together they had sat on the shore until dark, Jule's two Indians and Joe Bedard squatting beside the canoes at the edge of the water some hundred yards away. There had been something approaching an argument between Roche and Jule, escape from which Jule had effected by calling her two Indians to her. They had escorted her to her canoe and had pushed out across the lake in the gathering darkness, leaving Roche and Bedard standing on the shore. Roche had been furious at first, then realizing how little he could gain from anger, had turned philosophical, consigned women in general to perdition, took a normal night's rest, slipped away early the next morning with Joe Bedard, and returned to The Pas.

But no one ever knew why Jule Allen had failed to live up to her agreement with Phil Roche, and the girl herself never came to town to give anyone an opportunity of learning her side of the story. That her action came to be looked upon with general disfavor was only natural even though Phil Roche had few qualities to commend him to the favor of those who knew him.

"And do you share the feeling that the others have for Jule Allen?" Marion Curtis asked Kirk when he had finished telling her the story.

Kirk considered a while before he made answer.

"I have seen Jule Allen only once," he replied finally. "That was four years ago, and she was a mere girl then. She is a woman now. She was a woman last summer when she met Phil Roche. A woman that's worth anything doesn't do that kind of thing."

"You almost make me hope that Phil Roche wins the race," she said smiling.

Then briefly she told him of the hopes she had once entertained and the harsh fate that had intervened just when it seemed she was about to realize them. Kirk listened and felt again the deep appeal of her voice.

“You will permit me to say that I am sorry,” he said when she paused finally.

“I know you are sincere when you say that,” she said, “but regrets are not at all necessary. I know how to lose without whimpering. And I have put all that behind me. Warren Paxton and his set have dogged my tracks without ceasing ever since I began to show them that I could get along without the help of a brilliant husband. And we’ve got Paxton in a game now that’s going to be won by the best man. He’s in—he can’t get out—he’s got to go in farther. And in the end he’s got to take his licking, by George, or Marion Curtis has to take it. I’m not superstitious but if Phil Roche wins this race Warren Paxton will take it as a good omen. I want his money now if I put a match to it as soon as I get it. I’m going to play him right across the table until he’s had enough.”

When she had finished speaking she looked steadily at Kirk a moment.

“What I want to know is, are you in the game too?” she said, and her voice had lost all its mellowness.

Kirk considered a moment.

“I don’t know much about it yet,” he said slowly, “but—is Henry Tyne in it?”

“It’s almost life or death to Henry Tyne,” she declared.

“Then it’s life or death to me,” Kirk replied.

CHAPTER VI.

Fifteen minutes before the time announced for the start Kirk swung his team over the high bank of the river and down the trail that led to the ice-level. In the cariole sat Ruth Mackay, a light robe tucked about her, observing with admiration and satisfaction the spirited movements of the dogs with Bingo in the lead. Already a number of the teams were in their places waiting for the word to go and the crowd had been gathering for more than half an hour. Following close behind Kirk came Tuck Roberts, his dogs yelping and snapping in their eagerness for action. At the sight of Tuck's approach a cheer went up that brought a smile to Ruth's face as she turned and looked behind her, first at Tuck's racers and then at Kirk Brander.

"I believe they want us to win," she said simply.

But even as she spoke a second cheer rose from the crowd and looking behind him as he ran Kirk saw Phil Roche and his team dropping down in the trail behind him. Then as they broke through the crowd and the teams took their positions before the starting line, Kirk had a glimpse of Marion Curtis, radiant and smiling, standing beside Warren Paxton.

Then, with a strange presentment of evil, Kirk noticed for the first time the figures of Jim Cavanagh and Sergeant Keene of the Mounted Police pushing their way quietly through the crowd. They had evidently just arrived and Kirk sensed something unpleasant in their manner as they approached Bob Harkwell of the race committee and held him in conference for a few minutes. It was evident from the hush that gradually came upon the crowd that Kirk's vague fears were shared by others besides himself.

When they had finished their talk, Harkwell, Cavanagh and Keene left their place near the starting line and made their way towards Kirk. When they were within a few yards of him, Cavanagh beckoned to Kirk and the three men waited until he joined them.

"What's the trouble, Jim?" Kirk asked as he came within easy speaking distance.

Cavanagh's voice was quiet and altogether inoffensive.

"Get Tuck over here for a minute," he replied.

Kirk left at once and in a moment returned accompanied by Tuck.

“Sorry to have to step in on you like this, boys,” Cavanagh explained, “but I have my work to do.”

“You don’t mean—” Kirk began.

Cavanagh was serious. “I’m damn’ sorry to have to say so, Brander, but the trail from that fur cache seems to lead here.”

“Where?”

“Tuck.”

The word struck Kirk like a knife-thrust. He turned to Tuck and looked at him.

“Why—Tuck!” he appealed.

But Tuck gave him no reply. He was standing motionless, his face white and expressionless, his eyes fixed upon Cavanagh and Keene.

The crowd, looking for sensation, moved in about the small group, and it was not long before even the drivers left their teams for a few hurried moments to learn what they could of the startling turn affairs had taken. Roche, having left his team with Joe Bedard whose own team was next to Roche’s at the starting line, pressed close and listened attentively to every word.

“Awful foolish of Tuck,” he remarked to a bystander.

Kirk pressed Cavanagh for an explanation, but the constable warned him that the interests of everyone concerned would be best served by leaving any discussion of the affair until the proper time had arrived. Bail to any amount was offered but the serious nature of the crime and the circumstances attending it made it impossible for either Cavanagh or Keene to consider any step that would give their man an opportunity of slipping from their grasp.

Kirk’s mind worked quickly. With Tuck out of the race a dozen unpleasant eventualities arose. Kirk himself could do nothing by staying behind. He looked at Harkwell.

“Will the committee allow me to run for Tuck?” he asked.

Harkwell called his committee hurriedly and after a few seconds’ consultation Kirk’s request was granted.

“I want to take out Tuck’s leader and throw Bingo into his place,” Kirk said to Harkwell when the chairman had given his consent to Kirk’s entering the field.

“No rule against that, Brander,” the chairman replied. “Finish with the same dogs you start out with and there’ll be no kick coming.”

Kirk went at once to his team and, with the crowd looking on, began taking Bingo out of the harness. While he was engaged in the task, Roche pushed his way through the crowd and stood for a moment above him.

“Is this right about you takin’ Tuck’s place?” he asked.

Kirk looked up.

“Have you any kick on it?” he asked.

Roche grinned.

“Why, no, Brander,” he replied. “Come on in. But I didn’t think you’d do that.”

“Do what?”

Roche laughed. “What? for Gawd’s sake—Kirk Brander goin’ sub for a fur-sneak!”

The flame leaped within Kirk’s heart. He sprang to his feet and looked at Roche for a fraction of a second across the narrow space that separated them. In his eyes burned the fires of a man who had been stung almost to madness. The next moment he would have launched himself against Roche who had stepped back suddenly on the defensive. But there was a quick movement among the men standing close to him and strong arms were about him before he could move. Roche, having recovered from his first surprise, had to be held back in like manner and the two stood facing each other across the small open circle, the arms of each held by at least a half dozen men almost as strong as themselves.

Close by stood Marion Curtis, her eyes flashing from excitement. But Ruth Mackay came between the men and facing Kirk looked at him with her soft dark eyes wet with tears.

“The race, Kirk,” she said quietly, struggling to keep the sob out of her voice.

Kirk turned at once to his work and in a few minutes he was in his position ready for the start. For a moment only did he take his attention from his team and that was to step aside once and grip the hand of Tuck Roberts who waited between Cavanagh and Keene to see the dogs get off. No word passed between them. Tuck smiled a little but Kirk’s face was set.

At five minutes to six the teams were all in position—some twenty in all—and the men eager to be off. The trail led before them up the river into the northerly setting sun, and the white snow was tinged lightly with rose where the little drifts stood up behind their lengthening shadows of blue.

Suddenly Harkwell stepped out and stood before the line of racers. He called on them to voice their protests if they had any and for a moment all waited in silence. No one spoke a word of protest and the chairman moved to one side and drew out his watch. The dogs, many of whom had been lying quietly in the snow, leaped up at the commands of their drivers and began tugging at their traces and yelping. Then Harkwell raised his hand.

“Are you ready?”

There was a moment more of waiting and holding the dogs in check.

Then—

“Mush!” and Harkwell’s hand dropped.

The dogs sprang forward snarling and snapping and the men ran alongside using the heavy ends of their whips to keep them from fighting when they came too closely together, while the crowd pressed in and cheered their favorites.

Hoping to avoid a mix-up on the start, Kirk held his team back until the way was clear and then gave the word to his leader and was off. Only once he looked back as he heard Ruth’s voice calling to him and then he caught sight of Marion Curtis standing silent and unmoving, her eyes straight before her on the trail that he was taking. He fell in at the end of the long line of racers now following each other in a single file that veered and turned and twisted its way along the river trail.

When the crowd had finally dispersed and gone back to the town, Ruth still stood on the high bank above the river, her eyes fixed upon the vanishing line of racers, now like a thin knotted thread of black against the snow. And thus she stood until Kirk and his team, the last in the long line, grew faintly visible and vanished finally around a bend in the river.

CHAPTER VII.

The sun had already set by the time the team leading the long line of racers left the level of the river and climbing the bank swung off in a northerly direction over a winter portage. The river trail had taken them about fifteen miles from the starting line and the remainder of the outward half of the course, being tween forty and fifty miles, lay along a winter trail that ran across country, emerging now and then for a few miles along the rivers and across the lakes that abound in the country between The Pas and Sturgeon Landing.

In the quickly gathering dusk Kirk Brander found it almost impossible to keep his eye on the leading team. The line was still strung out at length, each team following closely the team in front, the nose of the lead-dog almost brushing the legs of the runner ahead. Occasionally a team that had led for a few miles would draw aside and allow the team behind it to move into first place and break the trail which was now becoming very heavy in spots where the snow had drifted in and banked up in the open space between the trees. There was no conversation among the men except now and then when a change in order made it necessary for one team to swing out of the trail to allow another to move up into its place. Even then the dogs required so much attention that little opportunity was given to talk. Only the gruff commands of the drivers and the occasional cracking of whips broke the silent monotony of the performance and even these sounds became less frequent as the night settled down with the cold snap of frost in the air. Little could be heard save the light tinkle of the bells, the rhythmic pad of moccassined feet in the snow and the soft brushing of the toboggans in the trail.

For at least twenty-five miles there was little change in the relative positions of the racers. Breaking trail through snow-drifts that have been left by a three days' blizzard is slow and arduous work and the men showed little desire to compete for the honor of leading the others at this stage of the race. Gradually, however, Kirk found himself approaching the front of the line as team after team dropped out of the leading position and took its place at the end of the string, where it had no difficulty in keeping up with the others. Of the twenty or more teams that had left the starting line together all were still running consistently and it was apparent that there would be no real trial

either of endurance or of speed until the course had been broken on the outward half and a hard keen trail provided for the return.

Within ten miles of Sturgeon Landing, however, Kirk became gradually conscious of a new element entering the contest. At first he could not tell what prompted the feeling, but some instinct within him announced that the mere routine of measuring mile after mile was suddenly at an end and that before long he would be in a struggle in which mere mileage would be of small importance. It was apparent, too, that others in the line felt as he did, for the cracking of whips became more frequent, the drivers' voices spoke with more urge, and even the dogs seemed to have awakened to the fact that they were running a race. They barked and snapped ill-naturedly as they trotted along in their harness.

As they broke from the cover of the woods and came out upon the wind-beaten level of Sturgeon Lake for the last few miles of the outward course to the Landing, only three teams were ahead of Kirk in the line. The fact that two of these teams were driven by Joe Bedard and Phil Roche gave him some food for thought. He was not afraid of anything either of them might do individually, though he did not underestimate Roche's ability nor his gameness. But he knew Bedard was simply a tool in Roche's hands and he was just a little anxious to know how the two would work together. That they would work together he had not the slightest doubt. He had brought upon himself the enmity of both of them and the two had been friends for a long time.

Suddenly the team in the lead dropped back and Roche urged his dogs forward as he took the first position. It was evident that he was going to take advantage of the new conditions afforded by the lake to test out the spirit of his dogs. The gap between Roche and Bedard widened. With an occasional flourish of the whip, Roche was urging his team forward in a sprint that showed clearly that from this point on, speed as well as endurance would be a factor in the struggle for mastery.

Before them lay the blue-white expanse of the lake, unbroken save where an island with its burden of spruce trees shouldered up dimly under the cold light of the stars. Beyond, less than ten miles away, was Sturgeon Landing, the trading post that would mark the end of trail-breaking and the beginning of the real race homeward.

Kirk looked back. Immediately behind him lay a stretch of two hundred yards or more to the next team following. He dropped back a little from the end of his cariole and pressed his toe into the snow in three or four spots

beside the trail over which his dogs had run. Under his soft moccassin the surface of the snow was crisp. The warm sun had melted it during the day and the night frost had encrusted the snow with a thin film of ice. He straightened himself and lengthened his stride till he came up with his dogs again. The change of gait made him conscious of his own reserve. He delighted in the easy response of his muscles and felt doubly alive. He was never so fit in his life.

“If you get away from me to-night, Phil,” he said to himself, “you’ll have to travel.”

Kirk’s only fear was for his dogs. That they were in perfect condition for the test that he would have to put them to he had no doubt—provided the crusted snow did not cut their feet. He went alongside and examined them each in turn, watching their movements carefully for the first indication of sore feet. When he had satisfied himself that they were still running strong he dropped back again behind the cariole and fell into his usual stride.

Ahead of him, separating him from Joe Bedard, ran a young stranger who had come in from the outside to run his dogs in the race.

“For a man who doesn’t like this kind of race,” he thought to himself, as he recalled something he had heard the young outsider say, “the stranger is making a fairly good showing.”

But Phil Roche was steadily and persistently increasing his lead and Joe Bedard seemed in no way excited about it or anxious to keep the gap from lengthening. Then Kirk began to notice the pace falling off. The difference was scarcely perceptible at first and had he not been so keenly alert to his own exceptional fitness he might easily have been tempted to think that he was growing tired. But he knew he had a safe reserve of energy that had not been drawn upon as yet and he knew, too, that if Roche and Bedard had a game of their own planning which they intended to play, it was just about time for them to begin.

That the drivers all knew the rules of the race, Joe Bedard included, Kirk had not the slightest doubt. A protest was all that would be necessary in the event of any flagrant breach of those rules, provided sufficient evidence could be given to prove the breach. But rules governing a dog race are no more likely to operate perfectly than any other man-made laws and Kirk knew that Roche was crafty enough to do his scheming within the narrow limits of the laws under which they were running.

One course was open to Kirk. He might speak to the driver of the team that separated him from Bedard and ask him either to move into second

place or to step to one side and give him an opportunity of doing so without turning his dogs out of the trail. Once he was within reach of Bedard he could handle the situation directly and at least find out something of what their scheme was.

Even as he thought it over, the voice of the driver ahead came to him.

“This pace is gettin’ a little slow for me,” he called back. “How about you, pardner?”

“Go ahead—I’m with you!” Kirk replied.

In a moment the young fellow was alongside, close to Bedard’s left, with Kirk following closely behind. Realizing suddenly that they were going to pass him, the half-breed began flourishing his whip and calling to his dogs. The two teams raced along side by side, Bedard doing his utmost to stay abreast.

Thinking to discourage him and, if possible, push him out of the trail, Kirk urged Bingo into the narrow space between the two carioles ahead of him. The next moment, however, he cursed his bad judgment. Jumping forward suddenly, Bedard struck his leader sharply and drove him to the left where he collided with the leader of the other team. There was a menacing snarl, a couple of quick snaps from angry jaws and both teams stopped as if they had hit a stone wall. Kirk was unable to bring his dogs to a standstill quickly enough to avoid trouble and before he knew what had happened, fifteen dogs were rolled together in a churning mass in which even Bingo was indistinguishable from the rest.

Nothing could possibly look more hopeless. With Roche gaining ground every minute, his dogs spending their energy only on the trail and saving their reserve for later, Kirk knew what a handicap he was being forced to give by this unforeseen mix-up. If his dogs came out of it with their legs and feet still sound he would be lucky. At any rate, they would have less strength left to draw upon if the final test should prove to be a strenuous one—and with Roche already a mile ahead of them, Kirk had no doubt that the test would require every ounce of energy his dogs could muster, to say nothing of himself.

Kirk did not hesitate a moment. Stepping quickly into the tumbling mass he kicked and shoved his way towards the centre where he found Bingo and stooping, he lifted the dog bodily from the ground and carried him towards the outside. Regardless of the snapping jaws and tearing feet and rolling bodies about him he succeeded in extricating his leader whose teeth were set in the shaggy throat of a dog belonging to the team that had tried to pass

Bedard. The young driver stepped in at once and when they had separated the two dogs they started off in opposite directions, gradually working their teams out of the tangle by pulling on the traces in which the dogs were still secure.

When at last the dogs were separated and each team was ready again for the trail, the majority of the other racers with their teams going strong had passed them, giving the scene of the fight a wide berth as they did so. Kirk's mind was made up in an instant. This time at least he would be guilty of no error in judgment. He quickly examined the harness of his team and ran his hands hurriedly over their coats. They had apparently come off without any serious mishap.

"Ready, pardner?" came the voice of the young fellow who was waiting a few yards away.

"Right," Kirk called back in reply. "How are you fixed?"

"Reckon I'm out of the runnin'," he replied. "My dogs ain't used to stagin' a hundred mile race and a dog fight all in one night. Leader's laid out and another's bleedin' bad."

"Are you good for the Landing?"

"Sure—I'm good for the distance. I can run it with four dogs if my leader can't work—but I can't make speed."

Kirk came forward quickly.

"All right, stranger," he said, "we've got to make the rest of the way to the Landing together."

He turned to Bedard who was by this time giving his leader the trail and throwing his dogs back into their harness. As Kirk stepped towards him he lifted his whip and was on the point of hurrying off again as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Joe!" Kirk called.

For a moment the half-breed looked as if he was not going to pay the slightest attention to Kirk's challenge.

"Now—look out!" Kirk warned and drew his whip into position.

Bedard understood the movement and brought his team to a standstill immediately. Kirk went up to him and putting his hand heavily on his shoulder quite close to his neck gripped him so that he winced and made to move away as if he feared Kirk was going to kill him.

“Stand still, Joe!” Kirk commanded. “If you were a dog, I’d kill you. Killing’s too good for you. From here to the Landing you’re going to run third. I’m coming along right behind you and you’re going to make time—do you get that?”

Thoroughly cowed, Bedard gave silent assent by the look in his eyes.

“Lead away there, stranger!” Kirk called. “I’m going to bring this along. I don’t want him in the way when I come back.”

The dogs were in the trail again in an instant and the distance to the Landing was covered at a run that never slackened a moment until they arrived before the door of the trader’s cabin. While they were still about two miles out Phil Roche met them and passed by at a safe distance. At the first sight of Roche Kirk spoke a few words to Bedard and brought the end of his whip so close to Bedard’s ear that the half-breed made no attempt at so much as a signal to the man with whom he was in collusion.

They found the other teams already leaving one by one as they climbed the shore of the lake and drew up to the cabin. It was a matter only of minutes before Kirk was ready for the return trip.

Fortunately he was well away before Bedard left the trader’s. How far Roche was in the lead he had only a vague idea. It was probably not less than two miles—possibly even more. Without urging his dogs unnecessarily Kirk kept them swinging along at an even pace that was calculated not only to eliminate the slower competitors but also to reduce the distance that Roche had succeeded in putting between them. If he could only catch Roche within the next three hours he would be content to let the teams fight it out for the remainder of the distance. Daylight would begin to break in less than that time, and, for reasons of his own, he preferred not to force a decision until there was a little more light.

He crept up gradually upon one after another of the teams that were ahead of him. Carefully he marked them as he passed, keeping account of who they were and turning over in his mind as he hurried along the names of those who were still between him and Roche. The line of racers was badly broken now, the teams being separated by as much as a mile in some instances. The trail was keen and the faster teams had little difficulty in leaving their heavier and slower rivals behind.

The eastern sky was already brightening when Kirk finally swung to one side from the trail and passed a team that he had been following closely for more than half an hour. It had been a half hour of determined effort on the part of both men and Kirk’s rival had fought grimly to hold the lead until his

dogs could do no more. He veered a little from the trail as Kirk went by and waved his hand and shouted.

“Go it, you boulder!”

Kirk waved his hand in reply, shouted and cracked his whip. The excitement of the race was beginning to get into his blood now that speed had become the really important factor in the contest.

So far as Kirk recalled he had passed everyone but Roche now. Looking back in the slowly faint gray of very early morning he could see that no one was following closely enough to cause him any anxiety. The race now hung upon his ability to overhaul and pass Phil Roche.

For almost an hour he jogged along behind his dogs, his eyes blurred by the biting cold of the early dawn as he kept them consistently in the direction of the trail before him in the hope of catching a glimpse of his rival.

Suddenly as he emerged from the cover of the wood and came out upon a small lake he saw a moving shadow just leaving the lake level less than half a mile away. Kirk gained the smooth, even surface of the lake just as the shadow disappeared among the trees on the other side.

For the first time during the race he sent his whip alongside his team and Bingo left the trail at a bound as the report broke within a foot of his head. The distance across the lake was covered at a speed that was faster than anything they had done that night. Up the bank they leaped and took the trail through the thick growth of willows that covered a mile or so of low flat ground. They broke suddenly round a quick bend in the trail and came upon a team of dogs and a driver who at the sight of Kirk began to shout excitedly and use his whip. But it was not Roche.

In a few minutes, in spite of shouting and whipping, the racer gave way to Kirk and the trail was once more clear before him. The fact that he had failed in his accounting for all the teams as he passed them gave Kirk a feeling of uneasiness that grew as he went along. He had thought that Roche alone was ahead of him. He had somehow or other overlooked this man. Would it be possible that he had forgotten others as well. He went over the list and tried to recall them and to clear his own mind as to whether he had passed them or not. He thought so but—

In the half-light of breaking day he saw shadowy forms in the trail before him. Sometimes they were clear and again they bounded out of sight round a turn or vanished strangely where there was nothing but a straight

and open trail among the trees. Was it possible that the shifting lights and shadows of daybreak were playing tricks with his vision? He blinked his eyes and smiled.

“Kirk Brander, you’re going loco,” he said to himself.

Suddenly the sound of Roche’s voice came to him. Less than a mile off lay the Saskatchewan and Roche was somewhere within that mile. He urged his dogs forward and at the sound of barking that came from the trail ahead Bingo’s ears pointed up for a moment and with an answering yelp he was off at a pace that made the other dogs extend themselves to keep up without being actually dragged along by their leader.

Kirk was delighted with their unbroken spirit for the race had not been an easy one and there remained nearly twenty miles yet to go.

When they broke suddenly from the fringe of willows above the river and swung down the bank, Roche was only a few hundred yards away. The river with its covering of ice and snow shone white in the new day. On the eastern horizon, as if to mark the goal towards which they were striving, stood the sun, its red disk half showing above the black-pointed spruce. In the town, thought Kirk to himself, the people would be rolling sleepily from their warm beds to be on hand for the finish. And before him, his huge form plunging along in the trail, his broad shoulders hunched forward and his head low, was Phil Roche, urging his team forward with renewed vigor now that he realized that Kirk was on his heels.

Something of the wild spirit of the moment fired Kirk’s blood as he reached the river level and started in to overtake Roche. Here at any rate was no phantom racer, no trick of light and shadow, but the flesh and blood form of the man he had to outrun and perhaps—he did not know what he might have to do before he was safely across the finishing line.

But that first wild moment passed quickly and Kirk settled down grimly to fight it out. He remembered that in the crowd waiting on the river there would be the patient form of Ruth Mackay eager for the first sight of the teams coming round the bend in the river. He knew that even now, sitting alone, or more probably pacing the floor of his cell, Tuck Roberts was all but breaking under the load of suspense and disappointment that could be relieved only by the announcement of victory. He would have given the best blood of his heart to make these two happy.

Suddenly there flashed before his eyes the tight mouth and set face of Marion Curtis when she had last looked at him. Unconsciously his own mouth tightened and his teeth set as he measured the distance that still

separated him from Roche. The blood of his heart was not for Marion Curtis—he knew that—but the strength of his limbs, the iron of his sinews, a kind of animal pride in the clean blood of his veins, these were for her, and the fight itself, whether it issued in victory or defeat.

Already he was close behind Roche. He had made his dogs extend themselves and even Bingo was beginning to show signs of strain. Roche, wisely enough, was saving his team for the last couple of miles and refused to be hurried unnecessarily by Kirk's approach. Kirk was not ungrateful for a return to a somewhat slower pace. He realized that a mile or so at an even gait would give his dogs time to recover a little and prepare for the final spurt.

At last, within five miles of the finishing line, Kirk felt that the contest must be pushed to a decision. He let go the long lash of his whip and his dogs responded at once as if they had been awakened out of a half sleep. At the same time Roche renewed his efforts and the final struggle was begun. Ahead, against the clear light of the morning sky, the little white church, high upon the river bank, marked the spot below which stretched the finishing line. About half way along the course Kirk thought he saw something that looked like another team in the trail. A fear leaped in his heart and he strained his eyes to make sure that he was not being tricked again. But the bright sun gleaming on the white snow was dazzling to his eyes. Everywhere black spots danced crazily before him and he gave up looking.

“Wh-s-s-st— —bing!” He whistled sharply and shouted as he flourished his whip. “Bingo! Hy-yip!”

His leader leaped forward at the sound of his voice and turned aside from the trail as he came close upon Roche's flying heels. It was rather early yet to force the pace to the limit but Bingo seemed eager to get past and Kirk felt like letting him have his way. A sharp curve in the trail that Roche was following made it a good spot to pass and gain the position ahead with the covering of little additional ground. Before Bingo had reached the point where the trail angled across in front of him, however, Roche had sent his leader forward at a pace that clearly showed how determined he was to hold the lead. But Bingo was not to be denied. He seemed to have made the race his own particular concern and to have forgotten that he was under directions from a driver. His body was low, almost brushing the hard snow surface over which he was running and his feet flew under him as if they had been driven mechanically by some engine that knew no fatigue. Steadily he reduced the advantage that Roche's leader held with all the tenacity that a

huskie can show when he is urged by the whip-lash and the lurid profanity of a driver.

It was clear to Kirk and Roche alike that Bingo would not be cheated out of what he was striving for. Suddenly the expression of Roche's face changed. He raised his whip hand and before Kirk could interfere, Bingo received a sharp cut of the lash across the face. No dog could be expected to continue his speed unbroken in the face of such interference. Bingo leaped to one side, yelping from the smart and buried his snout in the snow between his feet.

At that moment Kirk's heart held murder. He had been running within six feet of Roche when the latter had drawn his whip across Bingo's face. At the sound of the dog's yelp of pain, he leaped across the intervening space and landed directly in front of Roche who, unable to prepare himself in time for the impact, floundered awkwardly in an effort to defend himself. Before he could raise a hand, however, Kirk's fist shot forward and met him. The result was due as much to Roche's own awkwardness as to the force of Kirk's blow. The big fellow dropped to the trail where he scrambled for a moment in an effort to get to his feet.

As he stood above him, Kirk was tempted at first to let him up and fight it out. But he remembered Ruth Mackay's words. He was running a race and much hung upon the result. He slipped off the thong that bound his whip to his wrist and seizing the whip about three feet from the heavy knotted handle, raised it above Roche's head.

"Don't move!" he commanded. "Lie there or—by God, I'll brain you!"

Roche moved defiantly but Kirk's hand rose just a trifle and the look in his face was savage.

"Don't, I tell you!"

Roche settled back on the snow breathing heavily and muttering curses. Kirk turned his head slightly and called to his dogs. Bingo, whimpering and shaking his head with the blood dripping from his jaws, came slowly towards him, his tail low between his legs.

For a moment as he looked at the dog's bleeding mouth, Kirk had all he could do to control himself. With his eyes upon Roche where he lay on the ground he ran his hands over the dog's head and neck and pressed his face close down to his ears.

"Bingo, Bingo," he said soothingly.

The dog seemed to understand at once that his driver had not held the whip that had cut him so cruelly.

“Bingo!”

Kirk’s voice changed suddenly and the dog’s tail came up in an arch above his back.

“Go after them, Bingo!” Kirk cried and turned the dog’s head down the trail to where Roche’s team was trotting along lazily now that their driver’s whip had been silenced.

Bingo’s face expressed understanding that was something more than merely animal. He gave forth a sharp yelp and tore himself out of Kirk’s arms as he started down the trail in hot pursuit. Kirk waited with an eye upon Roche until his team was well away and not until they had come up with Roche’s team did he move.

“See you later, Phil,” he said and his sense of humor had returned.

He was off at full speed before Roche could get up. Five minutes later the two teams, with their drivers following, were racing madly with only a couple of hundred yards between them and about three miles yet to go before they should cross the line.

And then it came again to Kirk’s mind that another team was even then finishing the race down there where he could see the black line of the crowd that was waiting. No matter—he would run to beat Roche. If another arrived before him he had done as much as his dogs could do and no one could do more.

The last quarter of a mile was a contest to break the stoutest heart. Roche’s dogs had spent less of their energy, they had had nothing besides the race itself upon which to lay it out. Two of Kirk’s dogs were plainly tiring and nothing but the fierce spirit of the fighter was keeping Bingo on his feet. As he led the way towards the finish his jaws were angry and red with blood and a constant savage growling came from his deep throat. Had Roche’s leader or any other dog, for that matter, appeared within reach of those jaws no human power could have controlled Bingo’s mad instinct to kill.

Gradually Roche’s team crept closer until with only a quarter of a mile to go his leader was at Kirk’s heels. The crowd that had come down to be on hand at the finish had run up the course to meet the rivals and their constant cheering was disconcerting to the dogs. But Bingo, his head low and his

fierce eyes shifting only a little from side to side, growled and snarled at the first approach of anyone who ventured near enough to cause interference.

Within a hundred yards of the finish only a few feet separated the leaders of the two teams. Roche's whip had been flying constantly—nothing else could have got his dogs to do what they were doing. Now, for the first time in the race, Kirk drew his whip back and sent the tip of the lash stinging against Bingo's flank. The growling ceased only for a moment as the dog's voice issued in a savage bark and with a forward bound that almost dragged the team from their feet he left Roche's leader and sprang over the line fully ten feet ahead of his rival.

Kirk paid no heed to the madly cheering crowd that surged about him and pushed their way in to get a look at the dogs. His mind just then was busy with other things. He went forward to where Bingo stood snarling and snapping in a wide circle of admiring men and women who were wise enough to keep at a safe distance. He was about to put his hand on the dog's head when Bingo turned and bared his white fangs angrily. Kirk drew back quickly. For a moment he looked at the dog and spoke once sharply. When Bingo turned his head towards him Kirk continued looking at him and his hand tightened about his whip. In Kirk's face and the slight movement of his hand, the dog read the mind of his master. Only a moment did he hesitate while Kirk's hand moved menacingly, then dropping his ears and lowering his head he crept towards Kirk, whimpering a little as he came close and waited. Suddenly Kirk dropped to one knee in the snow and drew the dog close. His arms encircled his leader's body and while he spoke with his mouth close to Bingo's ears the dog whined a little and leaned heavily towards him.

Kirk looked up quickly at the sound of a familiar voice and got to his feet just as Ruth Mackay broke through the crowd.

"Kirk, Kirk!" she cried as she ran to him and flung her arms about him.

Then, seeing Bingo, she dropped on her knees beside the dog unmindful alike of the warnings from the crowd and of Kirk's futile efforts to hold her back.

"Look out—the dog's mad!" someone cried from out of the crowd.

But Ruth was already on the ground, her arms about the dog's neck, her face buried in his warm and shaggy neck.

"Bingo, Bingo," she said softly and the dog, his sides panting and his whole body trembling, snuggled closer to her as she spoke his name.

And as he looked at the two of them, Kirk was aware of Marion Curtis standing behind him. He turned and faced her where she stood smiling and silent on the edge of the crowd near him. She did not move nor did the expression on her face change as he smiled in reply and raised his hand slightly by way of greeting.

Later when he drove his team up from the river and walked down the street with Ruth beside him on the way to see Tuck, he ventured to ask a question which had been on his mind ever since he had crossed the line ahead of Roche.

“There was nobody ahead of us, was there, Ruth?”

She looked at him in surprise.

“In the race?”

Kirk nodded.

“Why, no, you foolish! We won it!”

And Kirk could not help wondering just who, after all, had won it and who had helped to bring victory out of defeat.

CHAPTER VIII.

Half an hour later Kirk and Ruth Mackay left Tuck Roberts and went out into the street. Kirk had his dogs to attend to and felt the need of a few hours' rest himself. He paused a moment before leaving Ruth and took her hand.

"You mustn't allow this affair to get you, Ruth," he warned and he smiled at her. "You've got a red nose now and your eyes look as if you hadn't had any sleep for a week. Perk up, Ruth, girl—perk up! It'll be all right in a day or so."

"I'm not really worrying over it, at all," she replied. "Tuck has told me all about it and—he says he didn't do it."

"And you believe him?"

Ruth looked at him quickly. "Tuck has never told me what wasn't true," she replied with some emphasis. "He didn't have a thing to do with this fur stealing. If he had—he'd have told me."

"That's the stuff, Ruth," Kirk replied. "Forget it!"

"It's a bad thing for Tuck just the same," she said slowly as if thinking aloud. "It should never have happened."

Kirk looked at her with questioning eyes. She turned her face to him and moving closer put her hand on his arm.

"We can't always say what we're thinking about," she said and drew away in silence.

Though Kirk Brander had known Tuck Roberts for years, during which they had shared their trials and split their gains, it was evident that Ruth Mackay's heart held something that was closed to the outer world. And although he could not escape the chill which came to him with the conviction that he was of the outer world where Ruth and Tuck were concerned, he could not but think the better of both of them for the confidence they imposed in each other.

On his way back he called for a moment to have a word alone with Jim Cavanagh. He found the constable in his office and when he had closed the door behind him he went directly to the subject.

“Tom,” he said, “what evidence have they on Tuck?”

Cavanagh did not smile nor did he attempt to evade the question.

“Brander,” he replied, looking Kirk in the eye, “you make it damned hard for a man to follow the regulations.”

“I know it’s against the rules—it’s against common sense,” replied Kirk, “but I want to know how serious the case is. I have my own reasons for wanting to know—and I give you my word of honor that no use will be made of anything you tell me.”

Cavanagh thought quietly for a long time looking out of the window. When he turned again and looked at Kirk his voice was very deliberate.

“The evidence is pretty circumstantial,” he said. “The furs were missed from the warehouse early yesterday morning and we found them cached in the woods the other side of the railway track.”

“But Tuck— —”

“Well—there were marks in the snow—it doesn’t matter just what—and we were forced to go and take a look at two or three kennels. Yesterday afternoon we went to look at Tuck’s dogs and outfit. We found the bells had been taken off and we got a little information to the effect that the dogs had been away nearly all night. That’s about all there is that I can give you, Brander. There’s a little more but it wouldn’t do you any good to know it and it wouldn’t help us any. But I’ll tell you this—and I don’t like to have to say it either for I’ve always liked Tuck—we have it on him if we ever had it on anyone and it wouldn’t do any good taking chances.”

Kirk stood for some time perplexed.

“The evidence may be bad,” Kirk remarked at last, “but if Tuck Roberts is that kind of a man I think I’d have found it out long ago.”

“We’ll not lose any time in finding out all there is to know about it,” Tom Cavanagh observed.

That Tuck would come clean out of the affair, Kirk could not doubt. And yet, with all the confidence he had in the man whom he had loved as his best friend, a sense of uneasiness grew within him as he recalled Ruth’s words. It was this that kept him awake long after he had gone to bed weary from his night’s exertions.

CHAPTER IX.

The presence of Marion Curtis in The Pas had been very trying to Warren K. Paxton. In fact her arrival had come as a climax to a number of trying experiences during the past few months. The world outside had begun to talk quite freely about the future of the mining industry in the north. The Lucky Strike, a small body of very high grade copper, had been worked under the most difficult conditions and yet had paid a handsome profit to its owners. From this single enterprise alone, there had come returns that inspired confidence. The wealth was undoubtedly there if it could be reached. But the Lucky Strike had been worked down to the lower grades, its further development had been stopped, and the eyes of mining men were turned to a large property, the Micmac, which was still in the hands of its original locator, old John Mackay. Two companies had taken options on the property at different times and had gone over the most of it with the diamond drill. Both companies had been forced out for the want of capital at a time when the property was beginning to show up well in the drilling.

Warren Paxton was a patient and tireless worker. For nearly a year he had been doing everything in his power to come to terms with John Mackay. But John Mackay knew more now about the value of his holdings than he had known before the diamond drill had gone over the property. He knew, too, that Paxton and the men he represented could meet his terms if they wished to and he was prepared to wait just as long as they. And Paxton had waited. But while he waited he had bought up every prospect of any promise in the neighborhood of the Micmac—every prospect but one.

That one was a comparatively small property which had been located and was still owned by John Allen. John Allen had called his property the White Squaw, and Paxton had used every means, fair and foul, to force the old prospector to loosen his hold upon his claim. But John Allen was no more approachable than John Mackay, and Paxton had long since reached the limit of his patience with the old fellows. For months, then, he had contented himself with keeping others out of the field. He had suspected Henry Tyne but had feared him very little. Henry Tyne's best days in the world of affairs were over. But the unexpected coming of Marion Curtis had set him to thinking again. In fact he had thought so hard most of the night

that he had overslept himself and had missed seeing the finish of the race. But he had at least made up his mind. He was going to act.

About ten o'clock Paxton stood in the hall before the door of Marion Curtis' room. Only a few minutes before from where he had been sitting in the large waiting-room downstairs, he had seen her enter the hotel with her maid and from the corner of his eye he had watched her ascend the stairway. When he had given her sufficient time to remove her wraps he left his chair resolutely and mounted the stairs with a precision that was even more pronounced than usual.

But in spite of his customary resoluteness and in spite of his wonted self-complacency, there was something in his face that betrayed a ruffled spirit.

The door opened in response to his knock and Marion Curtis stood silhouetted against the bright sunlight that poured through the window behind her. Here was additional cause for Paxton's discomfiture. He rather guessed that she wore an amused expression on her face, but it angered him that the light prevented his seeing her easily.

"I hope you will not object to — —" he began.

Marion Curtis chuckled a little.

"Why, Mr. Paxton," she exclaimed and held out her hand. "I really didn't expect to see you around so early. You must have been up with the rest of us to see the finish of the race. Won't you come in?"

She talked rapidly and Paxton found no opportunity to explain his early call and so put himself at ease.

"No, I didn't get up in time to see the finish," he replied. "They tell me it was quite exciting."

She stepped back into the room and motioned to him to follow.

"No, thank you," he protested, "I just came to pay my wager—wanted to prove that I was a good loser by taking the first opportunity of paying my debts."

"I hope you'll always be in a hurry to admit you've placed your money on the wrong dog, Mr. Paxton," she said quietly.

The remark found Paxton unprepared. Apparently there was nothing to be gained in exchanging pleasantries with Marion Curtis. She was a woman, yes, and a deucedly attractive woman, too, but when she threw down a thinly veiled challenge of that kind, by Jove, he would take it up.

“Don’t you think we could have a few minutes’ talk in confidence?” he asked.

Again she motioned to a vacant chair.

“Certainly, Mr. Paxton,” she replied in her most charming manner. “I suppose we are bound to come to it sooner or later anyhow.”

Paxton hesitated in the doorway. “Don’t you think it would be better if we should go to the little sitting-room at the end of the hall?” he suggested. Her laugh made all protest futile.

“Don’t be foolish, Mr. Paxton,” she replied. “What we have to say should be said privately, I think. We might be disturbed there. And besides, I’ve been my own boss for a long time. Come in and sit down.”

When Paxton had taken the chair which she offered him, Marion Curtis closed the door and seated herself near the window where she could get a clear view of his face.

“Now, then,” she said.

Paxton drew a bill-fold from his pocket.

“First let me square accounts,” he said.

She did not reply and he proceeded leisurely to count out the bills. When he had finished he handed her the money.

“I think I warned you against this,” she said as she received the money, and her eyes twinkled as she looked at him.

Paxton did not reply. He was not in a bantering mood. When he had replaced his bill-fold he leaned back in his chair and regarded her for a moment in silence.

“There’s no sense in our beating about the bush any longer, Marion Curtis,” he began abruptly. “You are not in The Pas to see a dog race any more than I am. Let’s talk business. Henry Tyne has been trying for six months to get his hands on that Micmac property. If he had had the money to secure an option on the property he would have done it long ago. Besides, old John Mackay is a stickler on terms. I know Henry pretty well and I really never suspected him. Now I’m going to tell you something. We have the money, we have had it any time in the last year if we had wanted an option on the Micmac. We were watching the development of the Lucky Strike before we made a move. When you and Henry Tyne come to terms with John Mackay you’ll find yourselves saddled with a white elephant that

will cost you a good half million before you can get out from under it. I know the terms, and I know something about what it costs these days to develop a mine. With the cost of copper on the down grade as it has been for a year or more, Henry Tyne will wish with all his heart and soul that he had left this business for someone with more experience in it.”

Paxton drew himself up in his chair and took a long breath as he regarded Marion Curtis. She did not reply at once and appeared to be waiting for him to continue. It was her silence that prompted Paxton to proceed.

“Now, I’m going to tell you just why I’m here. When I have made my position clear you will at least have something worth thinking over. The Lucky Strike has been working for a year or more. But they’re at the end of their job. All the high grade ore has been taken out and they can’t afford to ship out the second grade stuff for treatment outside. Their work is done there. Their plant is going to be idle until something else happens. What that something else is you know as well as I do. We’ll have to have a railroad and a smelter and no end of capital.”

Marion Curtis made a motion of impatience.

“Don’t you think we’d better come to the point at once, Mr. Paxton? I’ve looked into the proposition from the outside as well as I could and I know pretty well already everything you have been telling me.”

Paxton got up from his chair and walked towards the window.

“The Micmac property will not be worth a tinker’s flip to Henry Tyne or anyone else unless he can get control of old man Allen’s holdings in the White Squaw as well.”

“That’s precisely the point, Mr. Paxton,” she replied. “At least that’s the point we ought to discuss if we’re going to discuss anything at all. Of course, we might disagree on whether the Micmac can be made to pay without the White Squaw.”

Paxton had walked back to the other end of the room. He turned quickly and faced her.

“We cannot disagree on that,” he said.

“We might,” she replied, “but we are not going to. We can afford to let the point stand over until the experiment is tried. You can’t tell anything about a mine from walking over the surface. My own opinion is that the Micmac may surprise you.”

Paxton shook his head without speaking.

“I know what you think,” she continued. “The diamond drill has revealed no large body of high grade ore. But the property has been only about half drilled. The best half, I am forced to believe, is the part near the lake into which the drillers have never gone. We may even have to go under the lake to get at it.”

Paxton still shook his head. It was the only thing to do. Here was a woman that talked about mining as if she had been in the business of developing mining properties for years. She had as good command of the facts as Paxton himself had—he feared even better. Her convictions, he knew, were mere guesses. But he knew that all convictions touching an undeveloped mine are mere guesses, let them be held by man or woman.

“In short, Mr. Paxton,” she was saying in spite of his persistent head-shaking, “there is a romantic side to the mining game and that is one of the best reasons in the world why a woman has as good a chance as a man—or even better.”

“Then you are not in the field for old man Allen’s stuff?” he asked abruptly.

Marion Curtis looked out of the window a few moments before she replied.

“I didn’t say that, did I?” she replied.

“Then let’s get down to brass tacks,” Paxton said a little brusquely. “You haven’t a chance in the world with old John Allen.”

“No?”

“No. You’ll never own a ton of ore in the White Squaw.”

“You might at least tell me why, Mr. Paxton.”

“There are two reasons. One is old John Allan himself.”

“And the other?”

He placed an index finger on his chest. “I am the other—I and the interests behind me.”

“You could make yourself a little clearer,” Marion Curtis suggested.

“I mean simply this,” Paxton said, coming quite close to her. “We have done everything in God’s world to get John Allen to talk business with us but he’s as deaf as a barber’s pole. Ask him about his mine and he’ll talk

about cabbages. If you want to know what he's going to do about developing the property he'll tell you about a new brand of potatoes he's trying to grow on the bare rock. Ask him about the water power on the property and he'll tell you you never drank water like his in all the world. We've tried it for a year and we know."

Marion Curtis laughed more at Paxton's deep seriousness than at what he was telling her.

"You ought to try shooting him," she suggested, but Paxton allowed her remark to pass unnoticed.

"He won't talk business—one of these eccentric old Englishmen—"

"But he might change—some day," she ventured, "and when he does — —"

"When he does," Paxton hurried to remind her, "we'll be there to do the talking."

Marion Curtis smiled to herself. "We'll have an equal chance, at any rate, Mr. Paxton, if we put in our stakes in the Micmac. It's just across one end of the lake, isn't it?"

"You would save yourself a lot of time and trouble," he replied, "if you would remember that location isn't the only thing in the mining business."

Paxton drew his coat together, preparing to leave, and Marion Curtis got to her feet.

"It might save you some time and trouble, too," she said, "if you could get it clear in your mind that we are not depending entirely upon locations, either, Mr. Paxton."

Paxton went to the door and paused a moment with his hand on the knob.

"Naturally you'll drag young Brander into this thing," he said, looking directly at her. She returned his gaze without flinching.

"He thinks a great deal of his uncle Henry," she replied.

"Well—don't do it. It will do you no good—and it might possibly do him a lot of harm."

"I shall tell him what you say—he will be forewarned at any rate."

Paxton smiled thinly and went out.

When Paxton had gone Marion Curtis got into her furs hurriedly and called her maid.

“I’m going to be quite busy until about one o’clock, Kathleen,” she said. “And don’t forget—Miss Allen is to be here for luncheon. If she comes before I get back, just ask her to sit down and wait for me.”

She permitted Kathleen to arrange the fur snugly about her neck and then, smiling on her maid with genuine affection, she hurried away and a moment later was in the street.

CHAPTER X.

Late that afternoon Kirk Brander got from his bed where he had been trying to make up the sleep he had lost the night before. The race won, he was prepared now to put himself at the disposal of Marion Curtis and to give his time to the carrying out of her orders.

It was with a feeling of expectancy, therefore, that he stepped into the street and hurried off to visit Wu Lung before reporting for duty.

Before the door of the restaurant Kirk noticed a team of dogs and cariole which he recognized at once as belonging to Dags. The outfit was ready for the trail and Kirk surmised that Dags had already had enough of civilization as it was dispensed in The Pas and was about to make a hurried escape.

He found the old fellow paying for his supper as he entered.

"What's the hurry, Dags, old boy?" he said as he closed the door and stepped towards him.

Dags turned and with an air of patronage looked Kirk over from heels to head. To Kirk's surprise the old fellow was steady on his feet and his eye was as clear as if he had never taken a drink in his life.

"Kirk, my boy," he said at last, "I'm leavin' town cold sober—now what d'ye think o' that? An' while I'm sober I'm goin' to say what I'd say if I wasn't. There's some that can live in towns an' like it. They can have it an' be damned. They tell me you're goin' out to stay—somewhere south in the big cities. You can have it, too, but I'm here to tell you one thing. This country is bad enough, God knows. I'm livin' here but I'm only about half conscious most of the time or I'd get out. But I wouldn't go with you if there was free gold to dig in the middle of every street—no, not if it was the heavenly city itself with the streets paved with it. People that live in cities are a damn', Godless, cutthroat gang o' night wolves, breedin' dope systems an' yellow livers an' givin' twenty-four hours a day devisin' schemes whereby the human race can lengthen its rations and shorten its wind. If you're goin'—all right, go! Here's my hand, Kirk, an' God Almighty save you until you discover it's time to get back. An' when you do—get back before they get you so you can't leave. You understand me?"

He shook Kirk's hand as he spoke and looked him in the eye with an expression of real regret. Kirk realized that Dags was finding it hard to say good-bye.

"I understand, Dagsie," he said.

"Right!" replied Dags. "You'll be gone before I come back again—good-bye."

"Good-bye, Dagsie."

They shook hands warmly and Kirk stood and watched him until the old man had gone out and closed the door behind him.

Less than an hour later Kirk lighted himself a fresh cigarette, took leave of the half dozen or so of his friends with whom he had been discussing the details of the race, and went out into the street. He was feeling unusually pleased with the world in general. The winnings he had taken on the race in addition to the prize money which he was yet to receive would make a respectable showing alongside the credit he had already established with the bank. Altogether, he thought to himself, he was going back to civilization with enough hard cash to put him on self-respecting terms with his new life.

As he walked leisurely down the street, his mind bent upon seeing Tuck Roberts, he became aware of someone overtaking him. Turning he saw the bulky figure of Warren K. Paxton and caught a glimpse of the thin smile that covered his countenance.

"Congratulations on the good race you ran, Brander," he said as he offered to shake hands.

"Thanks, very much," Kirk replied, shaking hands.

"I lost some of my very good money on that race, Brander, but I have no regrets."

Kirk smiled. "You can hardly blame me for that," he replied.

"You're responsible, at any rate," Paxton laughed and the two continued down the street.

A few minutes later Paxton stopped suddenly before the door of his office.

"Are you in a hurry, Brander?" he asked. When Kirk showed no particular signs of haste, Paxton opened the door. "Come in for a minute or

two and sample my cigars.”

Kirk tossed away what was left of his cigarette and followed Paxton into the office. They entered an inner compartment which was separated from the outer office by a partition that did not quite reach to the ceiling. The place was warm and as Paxton took a box of cigars from an upper drawer in the desk Kirk submitted to the feeling of comfort that came over him and sat down readily enough after he had lighted his cigar from the match which Paxton held for him.

“There’s a little matter of business I want to speak to you about,” Paxton began abruptly when he had seated himself and had taken a few satisfying puffs from his cigar.

Kirk waited without speaking.

“You no doubt know there has been a considerable amount of mining activity in the country lately,” he continued. “I mean, of course, there has been some business activity, some little interest from the outside world.”

“I have heard a little about it,” Kirk admitted, “though I haven’t spent much time in town during the past year.”

Paxton nodded his head. “That interest will probably grow,” he went on. “Soon there will be men in here with a little money ready to buy up everything that looks like a prospect. The mining game is the same old story the world over. One or two men will strike it rich—the great majority will lose all they put into it. It’s a game that should not be played except by men who have unlimited capital, Brander, men who can afford to lose a million—five million—and carry on just the same.”

As Kirk looked at Paxton closely for the first time he felt an instinct rise within him that cautioned him against speaking. For months he had wanted to go out where he would have to deal with men of affairs whose concern was only with big schemes of development and enterprise. Here, in this man who was talking to him, the big world he had dreamed of was, as it were, reaching in and touching him with its finger. He listened with eager interest.

“I have just heard definitely to-day for the first time that your good old uncle, Henry Tyne, is about to plunge in.”

Paxton paused.

“I don’t know much about it,” Kirk declared.

For a moment Paxton seemed puzzled.

“That may be perfectly true,” he replied, at last. “But Mrs. Curtis will probably tell you all you want to know. Nothing has been said about it publicly—your uncle has seen to that.”

Kirk smiled in response to the little jibe at his uncle Hal.

“Brander, I want to speak frankly to you,” Paxton said finally. “You have been away from things for some time—I remember when you cleared out and left the old fellow without warning. It was a good joke on Henry, and I had a good laugh at him until he began to take it seriously. Now, listen. Henry Tyne has had a hard time of it during the last year or so. He’s not in the position he was when you knew him—and he’s not the man he was, either.”

Kirk felt the strings tighten about his heart as Paxton spoke.

“Now,” continued Paxton, “he’s going to put everything he owns into a deal that’s too big for him. He hasn’t the capital and he hasn’t the strength left in him to do it.”

Paxton’s words had not, perhaps, the effect upon Kirk that he had hoped. Quietly Kirk was beginning to see in a new light the part he was yet to play alongside his old uncle. He did not know in what position his uncle was financially. He would learn all that from Marion Curtis. But he certainly would not stand aside and see his old guardian beaten in his last days.

“It seems to me, Mr. Paxton,” he said quietly, “that Unk needs some new blood to help him out.”

Paxton’s air was patronizing.

“Brander,” he said in the mellowest voice he could command, “it’s time your uncle was quitting.”

Kirk started forward. “Quitting? Oh, no, Mr. Paxton. You don’t understand Henry Tyne. He doesn’t quit.”

“But he can’t go on—you’ll discover that when you see him.”

“He’ll go on until— —”

“Now let’s look things in the eye, Brander,” Paxton interrupted. “Henry Tyne is through—he knows that himself, only he’s too proud to admit it to the rest of us. Why, man, what do you think of his sending Marion Curtis in here on such a commission?”

“Mrs. Curtis seems like a very clever woman to me,” Kirk admitted in defense.

“As a woman—yes—I agree with you. But why send a woman? Don’t you see the poor old fellow is simply knuckling under to the fates.”

Kirk got up from his comfortable chair and walked about for a moment or two in thought. He had not been prepared for any such sudden introduction to affairs of the kind that Paxton discussed. There was so much that he did not know, could not even guess at, that he hesitated before it all even as he felt most eager to be a living part of it. Through all the maze of difficulty that faced him, however, he saw one thing clearly. He turned quickly upon Paxton.

“I don’t know yet what all this means,” he said, and he spoke very simply and directly, “but on one thing I am clear, Mr. Paxton. If Henry Tyne wants anything in this country and has the money to buy it, I’m going to stand by him until he gets it.”

Paxton had risen from his chair as Kirk spoke and coming forward now, laid his hand paternally on Kirk’s shoulder.

“Brander, my boy,” he said, “you’re young—”

“I may — —”

“Just a minute. You’re young and you have a career to think of. A little guidance from a man of practical business judgment will save you a lot of time and a lot of needless worry.”

“I think I can profit from the business experience of my uncle,” Kirk replied. “In fact, I am already employed by him and have reported for duty.”

Paxton saw that he was only making the situation more difficult by carrying on the discussion in such a vein. He turned suddenly upon Kirk. His thin smile had vanished and in his face there blazed the spirit of the real Paxton.

“Then, listen to me, young man,” he snapped. “You’re going to run up against the toughest proposition you ever faced in your young life. You think you’re going to get in here with the little capital you have and spoil the chances of men who could make something out of it. All right—go to it. See how far you can go before you cry for help.”

“You may make us quit the game, Mr. Paxton, but we’ll never cry for help,” Kirk replied.

Paxton seemed not even to have heard the words. “You will find out for yourself what it means to buck men with money and influence in the country.”

"I have bucked blizzards for five years," Kirk reminded him, his sense of humor coming back in spite of Paxton's angry ravings.

"I had no feeling over this affair at first," Paxton went on, "none whatever. I thought we could come to terms that would be satisfactory to everybody. We have some small holdings in there and would have sold them at a reasonable figure to make the proposition worth while for you."

"Maybe you'll sell them to us yet," Kirk suggested.

"Not by a damn' sight!"

"You never can tell," Kirk laughed.

But Paxton refused to see any humor in the case. He objected, moreover, to being laughed at. "Not by a damn' sight, young fellow," he repeated. "And we'll fight with every dollar we can raise and every bit of influence we can exert. When it's over you'll know you've been in a fight, at any rate."

"I think I'll like that," Kirk commented.

"You'll be welcome to it," Paxton returned.

"Only," Kirk added, "you'd better fight clean, Mr. Paxton, or— —"

He paused.

"Well—or what?" Paxton prompted.

"Well, there'll be bits of hide to clean when it's all over—and your hide is going to be in it if the fight isn't on the level."

Not a word passed between the men as Kirk pulled his cap down, buttoned his coat snugly about him and went to the outer door.

"Good-night, Mr. Paxton," he called as he paused a moment with his hand on the door knob.

A nondescript grunt was Paxton's only response. And Kirk laughed to himself as he went out into the street. He would tell Tuck about it, he said to himself, and Marion Curtis, too.

When Kirk walked into the crowded hall that night and looked them all over hurriedly in an effort to discover Marion Curtis, his blood was quick with new excitement. His talk with Paxton had given him re-birth into a world that he had known for months only in dreams. There was something big, something compelling in the feeling that just on the eve of his going out to find another world it should come in and seek him out. And that world

had come to him not only in Paxton; its dawn had broken upon him in Marion Curtis. She had been its herald, she was still its radiant symbol.

The dancers were already on the floor, the majority of them in gay northern garb of every description, their moccassined feet brushing the floor in soft rhythm to the music. Everywhere were bright faces that radiated health and happiness and the joy of clean living, and Kirk for the moment loved these people of the north country more keenly than he had ever done. When the dance was finished he walked across the floor toward Ruth Mackay, who seeing him approaching, left her partner without a word and ran out to meet him. As they met Kirk caught her by the arms, lifted her from the floor playfully and set her down again. Suddenly the crowd broke into a ringing cheer for the Derby victor. Kirk received the greeting with a wave of the hand and a smile that was almost boyishly self-conscious. Catching Ruth's hand where she had hooked it round his elbow he hurried to the side of the room and returning her to her partner sat down beside them smiling still as the crowd continued cheering.

It was then that his eyes fell upon Marion Curtis seated across the room from him. In her curt bow of recognition and her faint smile there was something that Kirk had never seen in her before. Laying his hand upon Ruth's shoulder he excused himself quietly and getting up walked over to her and held out his hand. She received him graciously enough and accepted his invitation to join him in the dance which was just beginning. Scarcely a word passed between them as they picked their way carefully among the dancers. But in Kirk's veins beat the joy of youth and good luck and pride in the modest intimacy with a woman who by sheer abundance of personal power seemed for the moment to dominate everyone about her.

When he led her finally to a corner of the hall and sat down, he drew his chair close to hers and faced her.

"I've discovered the dark secret you've been keeping from me," he said.

In a moment her air of detachment vanished. In its place was a look of eager interest.

"Tell me," she demanded.

Then Kirk related in detail all that had passed between him and Paxton. When he had finished he was surprised that she was quite serious in spite of his laughing.

"How long do you want to stay here?" she asked suddenly.

"At the dance?"

“Yes. Can you leave at once, or soon? We must talk over things a little and get to work.”

Kirk thought a moment.

“They will expect me to be here when the prizes are given out,” he said. “That should come soon and after that I can go any time—though I must dance once with Ruth.”

“Ruth?” Marion Curtis enquired. “Is that the name of the girl who met you when you came in?”

“Yes. You saw her? Ruth’s a good pal of mine.”

“She’s a pretty little thing,” she commented, and Kirk, for the first time since he had known Ruth Mackay, gave himself time to pause and submit her to a hurried analysis. And there crept into his mind a word that he had not had occasion to use for years. Perhaps, after all, Ruth was “inadequate”. The next moment he was sorry for the thought. He loved Ruth Mackay, not only because of her love for Tuck Roberts, but also because of a certain wholesome girlishness that she embodied in herself. And as he looked across the hall to where Ruth was seated, he thought of the heart-ache she was concealing beneath her chatter and her smiles and he could not help feeling resentful towards Marion Curtis.

Late that night Kirk sat in Marion Curtis’ room and listened to her own account of what she had done during her brief two days in town. To his astonishment things had gone much farther than he could even have guessed from what Paxton had told him. Paxton had come back from Winnipeg prepared to secure an option on the Micmac property. But he had not come prepared to bid against Marion Curtis. Before he could get word to his men and obtain their permission to act on his own judgment, she had made a tentative arrangement with old John Mackay, and Paxton was eliminated. Anticipating difficulty in another quarter, she had closed a deal with the owners of the Lucky Strike property by which she had a week in which to decide whether or not she would buy the equipment which was now lying idle in their old camp.

“All of which Warren K. Paxton knows by this time,” she said with an amused expression lighting her face. “But one thing he does not know—yet. He does not know that old John Allen of the White Squaw may be brought to talk business yet if he’s handled right.”

“You have seen him, then?”

“No, but I’m going to see him at once if you will do your part.”

“Count on me,” Kirk replied. “I’m in now and I’m going to stay.”

“Of course you’re in, but you’re simply paddling at the edge yet. I think I can see a day when this thing will be big enough for the biggest man in the country—and I want you to be prepared for it when the time comes.”

“What’s the next move?” Kirk enquired eagerly.

“We must go at once and find out what must be done to get the equipment transferred from the Lucky Strike. And we must see John Allen now before Paxton has an opportunity. Everybody just now is waiting for the spring break-up before getting to work. What we can get done before the snow and ice go will all be to the good. When can we go?”

Kirk hesitated.

“Why, to-morrow—anytime—but it’s not a very pleasant trip for— —”

“I must go,” she interrupted. “I must see John Allen.”

“But how do you know you can see him—he may not— —”

Again she hurried to set his mind at rest.

“Must I tell you that Jule Allen has been in to see me?”

“Jule Allen?” Kirk exclaimed. “But she never comes to town—only once in the five years that I have been here. Then she was with her father—just a bit of a girl. I can’t think of her coming in now after that blizzard—and alone?”

Marion Curtis smiled. “Yes, alone—and driving her own dogs. I didn’t permit her to go back alone, however.”

“Then she’s gone back already?”

“She left at dark this evening—had her own reasons for not wanting to stay—and I commissioned your friend Dags to go with her. He lives somewhere in the same direction, doesn’t he?”

“You know Dags, too?” Kirk exclaimed.

“My dear boy,” she replied with a somewhat patronizing air, “I have not been in your town for two whole days for nothing.”

Suddenly Kirk recalled Phil Roche’s affair of the previous summer. After all, Jule Allen was a young woman by now.

“She didn’t come in this morning?” he asked quickly.

“About half an hour ahead of you,” Marion Curtis replied.

Kirk suddenly thought of the phantom racer that had run ahead of him in the early morning.

“Good Lord!” he said to himself.

“What’s the matter now?”

“Do you know what it means to a running team to have a loose leader out on the trail ahead—always just round the next turn—barking and raising particular Cain all to himself?”

“I can understand, though I’ve never seen it done,” she replied.

“Well—next best is to have another team leading if you want to get the most out of a string of dogs. I wonder where she came in on the trail?”

Kirk was still puzzling over the problem when Marion Curtis, after a considerable period of silence, spoke again.

“Well, you’ll need all the loose leaders and everything else on the trail ahead of you in the race you’re going to run now, Kirk Brander.”

How truly she spoke she did not know at the time, for next morning before daybreak, Phil Roche was on the trail with a fresh dog-team. The trail led in the same direction that Dags and Jule Allen had taken just twelve hours before. In the cariole was Warren Paxton ready with a new offer which he proposed to make personally to that stubborn old Englishman, John Allen. He felt that his offer was extravagant but he was going to make sure of at least one thing—Henry Tyne and Marion Curtis were not going to get their hands on the White Squaw.

CHAPTER XI.

Although Paxton had done his best to keep his departure from town a secret, Ruth Mackay was at Kirk's door with the news before ten o'clock. The girl made no reply to Kirk's question as to how she had come by her information. On other occasions Kirk had observed the same reticence in Ruth's manner and although it had sometimes tried his patience he remembered that in the veins of her mother's people there had run the blood of the reticent Cree.

When Ruth had gone, Kirk went at once to Marion Curtis. She received the announcement without the slightest excitement. She did not need to be told that Warren Paxton was on his way to John Allen.

"How long are they gone?" she asked after a moment's silence.

"Probably three or four hours," Kirk replied.

"How soon can we leave?"

"I can be ready in an hour, but you—you can't—"

"I've got to go," she interrupted. "We can't let him gain a single advantage at this stage. If Jule Allen can make the trip, I can. Get ready."

"All right," Kirk replied. "I'll be ready by eleven."

For an hour Kirk gave himself feverishly to his preparations for the trip. John Allen's cabin was almost a hundred miles to the north. If they were to reach the end of their journey in time to check Paxton's move the trip would have to be made almost without a break.

By eleven o'clock they were on their way.

"We shall not talk another word of business until—until we have to," Marion Curtis said as they took the trail up the river.

And Kirk agreed. The trail is not a good place to talk anyhow. It is a place rather for long silences when the mind and heart expand under the magic influences of nature. And Kirk gave his mind to the dogs, his own dogs this time, with the untiring Bingo in the lead. The trail which they followed was the same as that over which the race had been run and over which Dags and Jule Allen had gone the night before. It was keen and hard

and the dogs trotted along easily, almost playfully, finding the weight of Marion Curtis in the cariole scarcely noticeable in their frisking high spirits.

The sun was quite warm and the snow shone with dazzling whiteness wherever it lay open to the sky. There was romance in the long stretch of the great river winding white and silent between its wooded slopes. There was romance in the heavy shores rising high on either side, the still retreat of wild life and the deep padded haunt of the hunter. There was romance, too, in the wide blue sky, the clean canopy of a man's world whose horizons lay somewhere this side of that other world which it shut out, the world of smoke and noise and corruption. To Kirk, who had lived the best five years of his life in the north, the romance was the air he breathed, it was the natural investiture of the world that was his, it was simply living. He knew that wherever he might find failure and disappointment and defeat, he could return here and find his veins filling again with vigor and courage and desire. But to Marion Curtis, whose eyes had never seen the northland before, the romance was something different. Her heart thrilled to its own bounding freedom, her blood raced with an excitement the source of which she could not have explained, her body was quick with eagerness to try its own powers. She was intensely conscious of her own beauty, of her womanhood supreme in a world where elemental forces moved at their own bidding, where man and nature were one in a common destiny.

They had planned to make the trip as far as Dags' cabin by late night, to get an early start the next morning and arrive at John Allen's cabin as nearly as possible with Roche and Paxton. Dags would be home, they knew; Jule Allen would have gone on alone.

Late that evening Marion Curtis had a new taste of northland romance when Kirk stopped his dogs on the rim of a lake, on the other side of which, some twenty miles away, stood Dags' cabin. They had eaten a hearty meal at Sturgeon Landing, a piping hot dinner of moose steak and fried potatoes which the trader's wife had prepared and served them, but Kirk never went far on the trail without eating and Marion welcomed the suggestion that they should pause and "boil the kettle."

Just below them the trail they had been following, an old winter portage, dropped down to the lake and they could see clearly the tracks in the snow that had been made by Roche and Paxton, and by Dags and Jule Allen the night before. Marion stood a moment and followed the long track as far as her eyes could reach. She ran lightly down the trail to the lake and stood a moment searching the horizon in every direction. To the north lay the lake with its hundreds of small islands growing darker now that the sun was

getting lower. On the shore above her the first faint flicker of the little fire that Kirk was making shone against the dark background of shadowy woods. Sharply outlined against the sky one tall spruce tree lifted its head clear above the others and stood out like a sentinel on duty. She could not help noticing that the branches in the middle of the tree had been cut off for a distance of ten or twelve feet leaving only a large tufted head and a thick base of branches near the ground. In the space that had been thus cleared of limbs two long branches like the arms of some gaunt spectre stretched out in opposite directions from the tree trunk, their ends weighted down with the soft snow that clung to them.

When she went back to where Kirk was busy over the fire she pointed to the tree and asked him its significance.

“That’s a lobstick,” he replied without taking the time to look up. “All up and down this country wherever trails lead there are lobsticks to point the way.”

“You mean guide-posts?”

He nodded.

“The two arms in the middle give the directions. That arm there,” he said, pointing to the branch on the northern side of the tree, “shows the direction we are taking across the lake to our friend Dags. When we get there we’ll find another stick—and others along the way marking short-cuts and portages and old trails that are the only lines of communication in this part of the world.”

Then they sat down side by side on a fallen spruce tree and drank their cups of hot tea while Kirk told her more of the romance of the lobstick, how it had been used by the Indians as a means of marking the spot where a hunter had killed a very large moose, or where one man had buried another who was his friend, or where a young brave had made love to a maiden.

And Marion listened like a child hearing a fairy tale, her eyes fixed upon the fluttering flame of the little fire at their feet, her face glowing in the red light that danced in the gathering shadows. Once after he had ceased speaking and as they sat together in silence watching the fire, Kirk allowed his eyes to rest a moment on her face. As he did so she turned and looked at him with a directness and frankness that startled him and caused his pulses to throb. Before those eyes he felt himself almost powerless. For a moment only did she look at him so—one tense moment of recognition. Then she dropped her eyes quickly and her fingers played with the scarlet fringe of the scarf she wore about her waist. Kirk put out his hand suddenly and caught

her fingers. For a moment he held them imprisoned, his eyes upon her face, waiting for her to raise her head. When she finally looked at him she laughed and he released her hand as suddenly as he had seized it.

"We're funny," she said, getting up quickly and walking a few yards away from him where she stood and looked back at him, laughing.

"Do you find it amusing?" he asked, regarding her seriously.

Between them there was being waged a battle as old as the centuries. Kirk knew, as did Marion herself, that there was little tenderness in the fierce appeal that each made to the other. Alone together, with the great silence of the north bearing down heavily about them, with long miles separating them from the conventions and institutions that are the trappings of the civilized world, it was as if they had suddenly become divested of everything but the most elemental, the most insistent upwellings of human desire. Marion's laugh at once maddened and disarmed him, and without another word he set about preparing to take the trail.

When they were finally on the way again, the stars had come out overhead and the air was fresh with the crispness of the night frost. Less than two hours brought them inside the group of islands that lay close to the shore. When they swung round the end of a large island they had been skirting for more than half a mile, the light from Dags' cabin on shore shone clear to them across the snow.

At the first sight of the light Marion exclaimed and Kirk replied with a light laugh. And in that particular and unguarded moment there passed between them a recognition that throughout the hours they had spent almost without a word on the trail that day there had grown up between them a kind of understanding, something like intimacy itself, that after all served to make them sufficient unto themselves in a world where there was no one else to look to for companionship.

The feeling lasted for only a moment with Kirk, however, and when a few minutes later he helped Marion from the cariole and led her to the door of Dags' cabin he was conscious of evading her glance in which, he felt sure, lurked the teasing, almost scornful smile that was disturbing to him.

Kirk threw the door open suddenly upon Dags frying a late supper of bacon over a hot stove. What was on his lips to say, by way of expressing his surprise, he checked suddenly as Marion stepped smiling through the doorway and went toward him with her hand outstretched. Dags' face, as he looked closely at Marion herself and then past her at Kirk who was standing

in the doorway, held an expression that caused both Marion and Kirk to laugh.

“No, we haven’t been married, and we’re not running away,” she explained, guessing what was passing in the old fellow’s mind.

“But we are hungry, Dagsie,” Kirk put in.

In a moment Marion had briefly explained their sudden appearance and had learned from Dags that Roche and Paxton were ahead of them about two hours—whereupon Dags set himself to prepare a meal large enough for at least five. Marion removed some of her heavier wraps and Kirk went out to relieve his dogs of their harness.

Before returning to the cabin Kirk followed a little beaten path through the woods to a point from where he could look out over the frozen, snow-covered surface of the lake. A white moon, almost full, had risen paling the stars with its light. It was one of the nights that Kirk had grown to love during his life in the north country. The moonlight pierced the black shadows under the trees where he stood and lay in ragged white patches save where the bold straight shadows of the tree-trunks gave severity to the patterns on the snow. A short distance from the shore and for miles beyond, the low black shapes of countless islands lay in the elfin glow of moon and stars. Accustomed though he was to scenes of rare natural beauty, Kirk felt that he had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. He was glad to be alone to enjoy it and yet, with the thought of the nearness of Marion Curtis, there welled up in his heart a yearning, at first vague, and then intense.

When at last he opened the door of the cabin and went in he found Dags in his normal mood pouring forth anathema on the country and the life he had nevertheless chosen for his own, a mood that persisted throughout the meal and well into the night while the three sat round the fire and chatted, Dags doing most of the talking between vigorous puffs at his pipe.

“People ain’t what they used to be,” Dags commented by way of summarizing his evening’s philosophy. “There used to be honest men—and honest women, too—but they all died.”

“You’ve lived too long alone,” Marion Curtis suggested, “you should have a wife, Dags.”

“No, I wouldn’t get married,” he replied seriously. “What would a woman do here? An’ I wouldn’t bring children into the world to live anywhere else. They think they are fixin’ things now by this prohibition they’re bringin’ in. Well, let them go ahead an’ fix. They’d have to put a

redcoat in every cabin north of fifty-three to make it work here. But even if they did, it wouldn't matter to me. I've drunk about as much as is comin' to me anyhow. I've had my share and I admit I like it. Some people drink—not because they want it—but because they want to raise enough nerve to give other people hell an' can't do it without a lot of bad whisky. Not me. I like it an' I'm goin' to have it as long as I can buy a pound of raisins. When they close the grocery shops I'll begin growin' potatoes and savin' the skins. They'll have to pass a law against a man havin' his own garden. Human nature's a stubborn beast—you can coax it a little but when you start pushin' it, it's liable to lie down on you. Better leave it alone—it's goin' ahead fast enough anyhow."

They sat late at the table that night and finally, after everything possible had been done to give Marion Curtis comfortable quarters for the night, Kirk got up from the bench on which he had been sitting and throwing on his mackinaw and cap, took his whip from the wall and went out to look at his dogs before turning in for the night.

Fifteen minutes later he stood again among the trees by the lake and breathed deeply of the night air. These were the last rare moonlit nights of the winter that was now rounding into spring. By the time the moon would be full again, the snow would have gone and the lakes unsafe for travel.

At the sound of a footfall he turned quickly and beheld Marion Curtis standing only a few yards away, her smiling face and her superb figure dappled in the tree-latticed light from the moon. In that smile there was revealed the side of Marion's nature that at once attracted Kirk and made him afraid.

Unconsciously his fingers tightened their nervous grip on the whip he held in his hand. He waited in silence for her to speak—waited until the silence became almost unbearable.

"Do you know that you annoy me terribly," she said at last. Kirk did not know whether the tone was bantering or merely assertive of her own self-confidence.

"I wasn't aware of the fact," Kirk replied.

"You do," she said emphatically.

"Just how?"

"Do you want to know?"

"I should never have thought of asking you if I didn't."

She came towards him until she stood no more than an arm's length away. For a moment she regarded him, smiling oddly where she stood with the white light of the moon on her face.

"Do you know," she said slowly, "if you weren't such a boy I believe I could make something really big out of you. I'd like to hold the destiny of a real man in my hands. By George—I'd make a man of him."

Kirk remembered suddenly that he was probably a couple of years older than she. Had he allowed himself to think of it, however, he knew that her experience in a busy world had given her an advantage that could scarcely be measured by years.

He struggled to preserve his sense of humor.

"You'd probably want to make a fool of him first," he replied.

"Is that nice?" she asked him and her voice tormented him with its quiet assurance.

"Perhaps not," he replied, "but I think I'd prefer making a man of myself to having someone else do it for me."

She looked at him seriously a moment before she spoke again.

"Two can do more in this world than one, Kirk Brander," she said slowly. "You don't intend to spend your whole life in a country like this?"

A week ago Kirk's reply would have been full of assurance. Now, he felt a strange hesitancy in committing himself.

"I like this country," he replied evasively.

"Huh—so do I," she laughed. "But don't you see—even Dags knows there is nothing here for anyone with ambition—nothing, I mean, to make him want to spend his life here."

"Yes," Kirk responded, "I see."

"And if you're going to do anything you'll have to make a beginning soon. You'll be through with this work in a year. We can hand it over to someone else and you can get out into a world where the opportunities are bigger."

There was something in the thing she was urging upon him that jarred horribly with what he had come out into the moonlight to enjoy. He wondered vaguely if she was unconscious of the rare beauty of the night and the passion of its silence.

He turned towards her and their eyes met. In that moment he seemed to see into her very soul. He glanced quickly towards the cabin standing back among the trees.

“Don’t you think it’s time we were going in?” he suggested quickly.

He stepped past her and started up the path towards the cabin. When he had gone a half dozen steps he realized that she was still standing where he had left her. He glanced back. She was looking at him.

“Come here!” she commanded.

He paused and stood with his eyes upon her.

“Come here!” she repeated.

He went back and stood beside her. She leaned towards him almost imperceptibly and he placed his arm about her. When their eyes met he could not help noticing the slow return of the smile with which she had tormented him. An angry impulse seized him and he drew her forcibly to him.

The next moment she had evaded him and he was standing alone under the shadows of the trees. Her mocking laughter came back to him from where she stood in the moonlight. Could she have known what was passing in his mind her mockery would have come abruptly to an end. But she saw nothing except the shadowy figure of the man she had baffled.

Suddenly he stepped towards her. There was a stern deliberateness in his movements and his face, now clearly visible in the moonlight into which he had moved, was dark with something she had not seen in it before. His hand with the whip in it was moving strangely as he dropped the long lash and, without looking at it, stretched it out in the snow with a quick, deft movement. She guessed what was in his mind and when he raised his arm slowly she cowered, afraid to run, her pride forbidding her to speak. Not until his arm came above his head and the lash started moving as if alive did she allow her voice to break from her.

“Don’t—don’t—please!” she pleaded, and moved towards him slowly.

He paused with his hand upraised until she came and stood trembling beside him. Then he took her in his arms and as he felt her arms go up about his neck and draw him down to her, he crushed her fiercely to him and pressed his mouth hard upon hers.

When he drew back from her a moment later there were tears in her eyes. He waited while she brushed them away and then trembling and silent

they made their way back slowly to the cabin.

CHAPTER XII.

Old John Allen had his friends and his enemies. His friends insisted that he was an honest man; and all his enemies could find to criticize in him was the fact that he was as stubborn as the proverbial mule. Old John Mackay had once numbered himself among the friends. He had prospected with John Allen for two summers and they had spent most of one winter together trapping. Besides, they each had a daughter and sometimes when they smoked together of a summer evening, after they had grown tired of talking of their prospects, John Mackay had spoken tenderly of his Ruth, and John Allen had lingered a little over the name of his Jule. And they had often dreamed together of a day when the girls would come together and love each other as sisters.

They had spoken only once of their wives. John Mackay had said something that implied that John Allen's wife was, at least, living.

The old Englishman's response had been characteristically brief. "She's dead—five years ago," he said.

The old Scotchman had received the information without comment. After a long silence he spoke with at least equal brevity. "So's mine—six years ago," he announced without the slightest intention of being humorous, and thereafter neither man ever referred to the matter of their wives again. Nor did they ever discuss their respective attitudes towards women in general.

It was a woman, however, that finally brought their friendship to an end—a woman, and John Allen's stubbornness. They had staked claims near the Lucky Strike before the existence of that property had been even thought of. They had heard the news of its discovery and had watched the development of the mine with interest at high pitch; they had noted with satisfaction the rush of prospectors who came in on the mere chance of striking something good in the neighborhood, had clung to their own claims in the face of tempting offers and had even bought up a few claims that had been staked close to their own. Together they had fought off Paxton's efforts to buy in practically everything of promise in the district—and they were still on the ground of their original locations.

But to return to the dispute that had separated the two old friends. John Allen had selected for his cabin a site that had won his heart the moment his eyes fell upon it. It was not until he had built the best log cabin in the country, however, and had gone to Saskatoon for Jule and returned with a half dozen large freight canoes loaded with furnishings and supplies for the new home, that he became convinced that he had found the sweetest corner in all the world. For a short time he was happier than he had ever been in his life before. He moved about leisurely in his canoe, and with his almost silent partner, old John Mackay, staked new claims or examined the claims that others had staked. Some day, if he had only the patience to wait, Jule Allen would be the daughter of a rich man with the world before her. And John Allen had the patience. Sometimes he showed so much of it that John Mackay felt annoyed, though he never spoke of it. It began to try John Mackay's patience, however, when old John Allen started in to make a garden. Somehow or other, experimenting with hardy varieties of potatoes and early maturing vegetables was not in line with prospecting. John Mackay watched him one evening digging in his garden and then went off alone for a stroll to the other end of the property. There he found an open space where the rock was exposed to the water's edge save for a thin covering of dry moss and a thin fringe of reeds that came up out of the water a few feet from the shore. Mentally he made a note of the spot. If anything should happen between him and John Allen, he would build a cabin for himself right there where the bare rock made gardening impossible. He would send for his daughter Ruth and they would live securely and contentedly by themselves.

He had not long to wait before his fears were vindicated. One day John Allen announced casually that he was going to have an Indian woman come to the cabin to do his housework and keep Jule company. There were no words between the two. John Mackay was determined not to live under the same roof with a woman. John Allen had only to look at his old partner to know what was passing in his mind. He quickly estimated the value of John Mackay's holdings and offered him a price. But he had not read his partner's mind clearly. For the first time in their friendship, John Mackay's anger got the best of him and John Allen learned that his partner had not staked claims merely because he wanted to sell them for whatever he could get out of them. He had come there because he belonged, and he would stay. They divided the property between them, adjusted their lines and named the new properties The Micmac and The White Squaw. The next day John Allen, feeling alone even with his daughter, stood in the doorway of his cabin on

The White Squaw and heard the sound of John Mackay's axe at work at the far end of The Micmac.

From that time forward the two old partners lived to themselves. Ruth Mackay had remained in school at The Pas; Jule Allen had been permitted to visit the little town only twice in five years. One thing, however, kept the two men together in spirit even if they had no more than a passing nod for each other when they met. They realized the difficult fight they both had to put up to defend themselves against the encroachments of outsiders. Of these outsiders Warren K. Paxton was undoubtedly the most formidable. He had bought up practically everything in sight that showed any promise whatever of latent wealth and had approached both Allen and Mackay frequently with offers for their holdings. To all his offers, however, they gave the same brusque reply and Paxton had given up attempting to arrange terms with them on what he considered a business basis. He did not fail to use other means of bringing the stubborn old prospectors to time, however, and for a year he had done everything in his power to force them to sell. All he got for his pains was an increased stubbornness that was tintured now with something of hatred besides. John Mackay had succeeded twice in selling an option on his property to companies that had done a considerable amount of drilling to test the values concealed underground and had failed to take up the option when they found themselves hampered by the lack of capital. John Allen's property had remained practically as it was the day he staked it, save for the assessment work which the law required him to do and a small amount of drilling which he had had done by one of the companies working on Mackay's property.

From their cabins they watched the work that Paxton was doing on his holdings. The Micmac and The White Squaw lay together along one side of a little lake and a narrow rapid creek that ran into it. Paxton's property lay along the creek on the other side and extended a short distance also along the opposite shore of the lake. Ripple Creek, the old partners had named the creek when they put in their stakes, and Ripple Lake the low lying sheltered stretch of water out of which they had paddled on that quiet summer evening years before after a long day's prospecting. Just above the place where the creek emptied into the lake ran the border line between Saskatchewan and Manitoba, on the other side of which lay the bulk of Paxton's holdings.

Jule Allen had loved the place from the moment of her landing. She loved the cabin, the woods, the hills, the lake, and the little creek. But most of all she loved the falls where the clear blue water of the creek gathered in a wide, quiet pool before it rounded out over the rock and plunged into

another pool below, foaming, turbulent, eddying, and hurried down to the peaceful level of the lake. The fact that two wooden crosses on the shore just below the falls marked the graves of two young prospectors who had foolishly tried to run the rapids in their canoe only gave an air of tragic mystery to the place and the horror of the incident itself soon wore off as the months passed and the stern beauty of the rapids gradually cast its spell about her. Hour after hour she had sat on the high rock that stood above the falls, content only to watch the water, limpid blue and marked with foam, and to listen to the ceaseless roar of its breaking on the rocks below. Each summer since her coming she had given the falls a different name as suited her fancy, but the rock she had called Eagle's Head from the first day she had climbed down along its ragged side to where an eagle had built its nest. And without knowing it Jule Allen had grown to feel that this little sheltered spot in the woods, this little cabin within sound of the rushing rapids, this little lake across which the sun set each evening—this was her home, the one corner in all the world in which she belonged and in which she could find happiness. Nor did her feelings change as she sat evenings and listened to her father as he told her of the fight he was putting up to keep the place their own and of the plans he had for the future.

Once, just a year ago, in answer to some strange upwelling of emotion within her she had listened to the words of a stranger who had told her of the great world outside, a world she had almost forgotten already, and thrilled, more perhaps by the wakening of her own womanhood, she had given her consent to leave and to begin life anew in strange surroundings. The stranger was Phil Roche. Once she had got free from the spell of his words, however, and had had time to think it all over quietly, seated on the rock high above the falls, she knew that she could not go away. Then for the first time she confessed it all to her father who heard her story without any show of surprise, hired a couple of Indians in whom he could place confidence, and sent her off to Cumberland House to meet Phil Roche and to tell him her true mind. In his own canoe, with a half-breed in the bow, he accompanied her half way and making camp on a little island in the lake, calmly awaited her return. When, late that night, she joined him, they put back again to the cabin and neither of them ever mentioned the affair again.

Jule Allen's trip to The Pas at the time of the dog Derby had been made because John Allen had agreed to meet Marion Curtis in town on the day of the race and when the time came had found himself unable to leave the house. Jule's going was her own suggestion and although she had gone about with her dogs wherever she wished for three winters, old John Allen found himself awaiting her return with an utterly unwarranted anxiety.

Nearly all the second night he had lain awake obsessed by the fear that some unnatural harm had befallen her. The next day he had sent the Indian woman out to the top of the hill that lay back of the cabin to watch for her. Before Jule left they had set an hour for her probable return, barring accident, and as the time arrived and then passed John Allen found it impossible to remain in bed. Getting up he wrapped himself in a heavy blanket and seated himself by the little window where he could see the trail for some distance up the side of the hill. At last when he saw the woman coming through the trees he got up and went back to bed again. Half an hour later Jule drove her dogs up to the doorway and leaping out of the cariole ran in and threw herself beside her father's bed, laughing as he told her his fears and giving him the stray bits of news she had gathered on her brief visit to town.

Concerning her meeting with Marion Curtis she had little to say beyond the fact that she had informed her of John Allen's inability to fulfil his promise to meet her in town. But in Jule Allen's heart there was much that she might have said, for Marion Curtis had affected her strangely. There was much about the woman that appealed very strongly to Jule. Her beauty, her dress, her manner of talking had won her admiration. And yet a hidden instinct had made her almost dislike her. They were of two different worlds, Jule Allen had felt that from the moment of their first meeting, and with little or nothing in common save their sex and the natural instincts that go with it, they could never meet on grounds of intimacy. Jule admired Marion Curtis in a purely objective, impersonal way, but was at the same time repelled by the utter complexity of her personality. All the way home she had puzzled over it and that night, blissfully content again in the security of her own bed, she lay awake thinking of her.

Early the next afternoon Paxton and Phil Roche arrived unannounced before John Allen's cabin. Jule was out at the time and learned of the presence of the visitors from the Indian woman who came out to find her. When Jule entered the cabin she sensed something unpleasant at once. The fact that Phil Roche was there caused her no discomfort, whatever, but Paxton's presence made her feel uneasy. She could not help the feeling of pity that seized her at the sight of her father sitting up in bed, his face white and troubled, listening to the unruffled talk of Warren Paxton. Even with her own lack of experience in the world outside, she instinctively felt something of the unequal nature of the fight which these men were carrying on. Now as she listened to their talking she grew almost to hate the sound of Paxton's voice, though as yet there had been no mention made of the purpose of his visit. She glanced only once or twice at Phil Roche but it was sufficient to

convince her that he was rather enjoying the very thing that was giving her pain. And in that moment she hated him with all her heart.

Suddenly there was a flurry without and Jule went to the door. Her surprise at seeing Marion Curtis was nothing to the surprise that Paxton experienced on hearing the sound of her voice.

When Marion entered the cabin a moment later with Kirk Brander, Paxton got up and looked at her with his thin smile covering the bitterest mood he had known for months. For once he was genuinely angry at Marion Curtis and craved, above everything in the world, an opportunity to tell her what he thought. But her jaunty manner and her self-assurance threw him immediately upon a desperate defensive in which he realized that all his self-control would be necessary if he was not to make himself ridiculous in the eyes of the others. Marion's sudden and unexpected arrival brought matters quickly to a head. After the necessary introductions had been disposed of in an atmosphere in which Marion alone seemed to be in cool possession of her full powers, there followed a brief silence while John Allen looked from one to another of his visitors and tried to read in their faces the significance of their unannounced visit.

"We might as well get to business at once," Paxton finally suggested, and his voice had taken on its accustomed brusqueness. "I've come out to make you another offer on this property, John Allen, and I'm willing to meet you on your own terms if you're willing to talk business."

Marion Curtis was quick to take advantage of Paxton's pause. "And I've come out prepared to bid a little higher than anything Mr. Paxton will offer you," she replied.

"You are making a wild statement, Mrs. Curtis," Paxton observed with an effort to remain cool.

"I don't think so, Mr. Paxton," she replied. "If I am I'm willing for once in my life to back up any wild statement I make. But I know pretty well what you are going to offer Mr. Allen, and I know I can better it. There shouldn't be much wildness about that."

Paxton grunted and turned expectantly to John Allen. Marion Curtis allowed her eyes to rest a moment on Paxton and then turned with a smile to look at the white face of the old prospector. From where she sat back from the group Jule Allen could see her father's face clearly. With the main facts of the case before him, John Allen was more like himself again. The sudden descent of four visitors had seemed so mysterious at first that he was troubled to know what new move he was going to be called upon to check.

But here was a simple situation, after all, where two people with money had come to bid against each other for the possession of his property. The troubled look faded gradually from his face. He lifted himself to a more erect position and cleared his voice. Then he hesitated and Jule's heart warmed as she watched her father's face grow dark with the spirit of the fighter that rose within him. She had feared for her father while he was perplexed. Now that he was growing angry her fear left her suddenly and in its place there came something that was almost rejoicing.

"Paxton," John Allen said at last, and his voice was cold and very direct, "for three years I have tried to get a square deal from you. At one time I would have sold out to you at a decent figure—half, maybe, of what you are ready to offer to me now. For three years I peddled my holdings without finding a man with faith enough in this country to put a dollar into it. When I went to you last year and showed you what the drill had uncovered you offered me just about as much as I'd offer you for a piece of ground to make a back yard. When I told you what I thought of your offer you told me to come back when I changed my mind."

Paxton moved uneasily. "That was only a way of doing business, John," he said in an effort to calm the old man's rising anger.

"Your way, Paxton!" John Allen almost shouted the words. "It isn't my way—it never was my way. I told you then that I'd never come back and I never have. I never intend to."

His face was tight-drawn now and his hand trembled as he spoke.

"It's your way of doing business that has made me lose all the faith I ever had in men of your type. They all do business in the same way. And you couldn't buy The White Squaw to-day if you had a cheque with you for a half million dollars!"

He turned and looked at Marion Curtis.

"I don't know how you do business, Mrs. Curtis," he said, a little more quietly. "Some day I might talk to you—I don't know. Just now I've made my own plans and I'm going to carry them out."

"I'm not here to buy unless you want to sell," she replied frankly. "Mr. Paxton knows, and you may as well know, that I am here to see that he doesn't get The White Squaw. I shall be perfectly satisfied to see you carry out your own plans provided, in the end, you do not find it necessary to surrender to the interests we are competing against."

"I shall look to that, Mrs. Curtis," John Allen replied. "The fact is—I found the property myself—I intend to work it myself."

There was a murmur of protest from both Paxton and Marion Curtis.

"I know what it means," he hurried to explain. "It'll take money—it'll take energy—it'll take time. I've got enough money to start on and I'll go as far as it will take me. I've got faith in the country and I have confidence in its future, and, anyhow, I'm going to live the rest of my days here no matter what happens. My roots have gone down and I can't leave. When I've spent my money, perhaps you'll see better what I have here and then maybe you'll come to me. If I can't show anything—the loss will be mine. And whose should it be?"

From behind Marion Curtis, Kirk Brander looked steadily at John Allen's face. There was much in the old man's eyes and in the lines about his mouth that was deeply pathetic. There was even more of it in his voice. There was energy, even determination there; one might even hope that John Allen would live for years yet and see the day when men of Paxton's type would come to him merely on the basis of good business and meet him on terms of equality. And yet Kirk could not help feeling regret that the old prospector's later years should be spent in a conflict with men of such ruthless methods as Paxton would unhesitatingly employ to serve his own ends. Ultimately, Kirk knew, John Allen would have to come to terms with the world. It was a pity that he should spend what was left to him of life in a futile struggle against hopeless odds.

Warren Paxton's previous dealings with John Allen had been enough to convince him on this occasion that there was nothing more to be said on the subject. He looked round at Roche and the latter moved towards the door.

"I'm going to warn you, John," Paxton said as he got up from his chair, "that you're going to play this fool game just a day too long."

"Well, it's my game—and I'm going to play it my way from now on," John Allen replied.

"And I'll say the same thing to you, Marion Curtis," Paxton replied, turning to look at her where she was still sitting near Kirk Brander.

"Mr. Allen's answer is my answer, too," she replied.

Paxton sniffed a little impatiently as he strode towards the door. He seemed on the point of saying something, looked quickly at Kirk, and then, opening the door passed out followed by Phil Roche.

Kirk left Marion Curtis abruptly and went out. He found Paxton standing alone before the doorway. Phil Roche had gone off a short distance to where his dogs were lying curled up in the snow under the trees.

“And I’ve got someone who will watch you, young man,” Paxton said as if he were simply continuing the conversation.

“I haven’t had any trouble lately in looking after myself,” Kirk replied.

“Well, your trouble’s starting.”

He left Kirk and walked quickly to where Roche was standing beside his team. Kirk’s eyes were upon Roche but between them there had arisen since the day of the race a feeling that awaited only the proper time and place to give itself expression. Perhaps Roche felt much as Kirk felt, that when they came to settle their score the issue would be their own, and for that settlement they needed no audience. He stood watching Paxton and Roche until they had crossed the creek and disappeared among the trees on the other side. Then he turned and went back into the cabin.

As he closed the door behind him he noticed that Jule had come out of the corner where she had been sitting and was standing now beside Marion Curtis. And for a moment as he looked at them he could not help recognizing the sharp contrast which the two made. Jule was young with a youth that would never grow old. There was warm life in her dark hair and eyes, her rounded cheeks and full lips, and in her young body the easy pose of one whose heart has expanded in quiet places. Hers was the pride of clean blood and simple hopes. Marion Curtis, whose pride was disdain, had come out of a life that had once been his, a life that he had left because it had begun to stifle him. Jule Allen was in her natural setting here in this simple place where Marion Curtis was an intruder.

And for the first time it occurred to Kirk Brander that perhaps Jule Allen might look upon him also as an intruder—and he found the thought strangely disquieting.

CHAPTER XIII.

That night Marion Curtis accepted the hospitality of Jule Allen while Kirk took his way through the woods to old John Mackay's cabin. On the other side of Ripple Creek, Roche and Paxton made themselves comfortable in one of the cabins the latter had built on his property the previous summer.

It was ten o'clock before Kirk turned out the next morning, helped himself liberally to John Mackay's store of provisions, and conscious that Marion Curtis would probably be in no great hurry to leave the comfortable quarters in John Allen's cabin, struck out alone to get his first look at the property, the development of which he was to supervise during the coming months. From the cabin he took his way along the shore of the lake for a short distance and then turning abruptly away from the lake climbed the hill that sloped gradually upwards from the shore. In a few minutes he stood on the crest of the hill where he commanded a view, not only of the property itself with its half dozen deserted cabins huddled together beside the little lake, but of the whole district with hills shouldering up from the lake shore and covered over with thick growths of spruce. Here and there where the hills had been swept by fire, white expanses of snow shone in the bright sunlight. The lake itself with its little bays and tree-clad islands held promise of hidden beauties that awaited only the coming of summer to unveil them to the eye.

But sensitive as Kirk was to the natural beauty of the place his imagination was at work on another picture. He saw the hillside just below him quicken into life and activity; he saw the trees fall back and in their places come houses and streets with people walking about in busy pursuits; he heard the hum of a great town at work, the ceaseless grind of its wheels, the constant rush of its traffic. And he saw himself there, something more than a mere part of it, the embodiment rather of its creative spirit, the inspiration of its enterprise.

Suddenly from somewhere quite close, it seemed only a few yards away, there came the confused sound of dogs fighting and a girl's voice breaking through with sharp commands. Turning and looking off down the hill he saw the dogs tumbling about in the snow near the edge of a clear space on the hillside. Close by stood Jule Allen doing her best to drive them apart but with little success. In a moment Kirk was off down the hill and rounding a

little clump of underbrush came suddenly into the open where he had a full view of the fight. Jule Allen, whip in hand, was doing her best to part the dogs, one of them her own and the other a dog from Kirk's own team that had somehow strayed away from the others. Jule's dog had been hitched to a small toboggan but one of the traces had broken during the fight and dangled at his side.

Stepping in quickly Kirk seized the whip from Jule's hand and pushing her aside seized the collar of her dog and throwing him back suddenly struck his own dog sharply on the nose with the butt of the whip. The effect was immediate and Kirk, still gripping the leather collar in one hand, turned to Jule who stood close behind him.

"Snap!" she cried as the dog growled and struggled to get free from the grip that Kirk held.

"He doesn't seem to know when he's had enough," Kirk remarked, handing her the whip.

She moved quickly toward the dog's head and without paying the slightest attention to Kirk's words, raised her whip and spoke again sharply to the dog. Dropping close to the snow the dog slunk towards her whining.

For a moment Kirk looked at the girl, radiant in her fresh young beauty, her eyes full of dancing fires as she spoke to the dog. Then he looked at the dog. He started suddenly.

"Where—where did that dog come from?" he asked abruptly.

Jule Allen straightened and looked at him sharply.

"Have you not been long enough in this part of the world, Kirk Brander," she said, "to know better than to ask questions like that?"

But Kirk refused to retreat before her rebuke. The fires in her eyes danced angrily but he scarcely noticed them.

"I did know better, Jule Allen," he replied seriously and he returned her look steadily as he spoke. "The fact is I asked because I wanted to know. I'll not bother you about it again but—I'm going to find out just the same. That much, at least, is permissible even in this part of the world."

She did not reply and he watched her in silence as she pushed the dog into place before the toboggan and with one knee on the snow set about mending the broken trace with a bit of string she drew from her pocket. He could not help feeling regret at the unfortunate turn their meeting had taken. There was so much that was attractive in the girl, so much beauty in face

and figure, so much music in her voice, and so much spirit in her self-assertion that he forgot for the moment the impulse that had moved him to ask a forbidden question.

Without speaking he knelt beside her and taking the broken trace from her, drew his knife from his pocket and proceeded to splice the broken ends. She did not offer any resistance nor did she speak a word of protest. She acted, rather, as if she was unaware of his presence. And Kirk worked in silence, allowing his eyes to move frequently along the dog's shaggy sides and neck. Twice he looked closely at the dark face with its small, deep-set eyes. Once when the girl lowered her head and turned away Kirk ran his hand quickly over the dog's neck and turning one of the ears back, looked at it for a moment. As he did so Jule raised her eyes and he turned again quickly to the broken trace.

When the necessary repairs had been completed Kirk got up and stood back a little from the dog, his eyes fixed upon the dog's head and face.

"I didn't mean to be offensive," he said, "but I'm going to be perfectly frank with you. It will avoid misunderstandings in the future. I know your dog—and I know where he came from. I don't know just how you got him but I'm going to take the trouble to find out, because it really means something to me."

But Jule Allen was already leading her dog across the clear space in the direction of a narrow trail that led among the trees and down the hillside towards the lake.

Suddenly it came to Kirk's mind to put his suspicions to the test. He raised his voice quickly.

"Darkie! Darkie!" he called.

The dog stopped in his tracks and turned his dark face towards Kirk. His ears were pricked sharply and he stood as if awaiting the sound of the voice again. But Kirk did not speak.

"Snap!" cried Jule Allen, and the dog headed again into the narrow trail.

Kirk stood and watched them until they vanished from sight among the trees. And as he stood alone his mind wandered back to the morning he had found poor old Wally Lamonte sitting upright in the snow, his dogs gone and his face eaten away—not by his own huskies, he knew now, but by wolves.

CHAPTER XIV.

After going over the property hurriedly Kirk returned to John Allen's cabin where Marion Curtis impatiently awaited his coming. When she had heard a brief report on what he had seen she suggested their going at once to The Lucky Strike and looking over the equipment. He got his dogs into their harness immediately and after a hurried lunch served at the hands of Jule Allen herself the two left the cabin and arrived at The Lucky Strike shortly after the noon hour. Only three miles separated the two properties and for the greater part of the distance the trail followed the shore of a lake and the crooked course of a narrow creek. For the remainder of the distance it ran up the steep hill that lay back of The Micmac and then along the crest to a point directly above the camp where it dropped suddenly down towards the lake. When they had gone hurriedly over the equipment they took the trail back again, going more slowly this time and, with their task in mind, carefully estimating the amount of work that would be necessary to put the road in shape.

They were both utterly weary that night when they entered John Allen's cabin and begged a second night's hospitality for Marion. But with all their weariness they were happy in the conviction that, although they could not expect more than two weeks more before the warm weather should make the ice on the lakes and rivers unsafe for travel, they believed the equipment could be moved and put in place on the Micmac before the break-up. They sat late into the night discussing their plans and John Allen himself entered heartily into the conversation, giving them the benefit of his experience. And yet, for all the freedom with which he offered suggestions, there was something restrained, almost disinterested in his manner. It was quite evident that he looked upon them much as he did upon Paxton. To him they were all outsiders, all intruders. As for Jule Allen, Kirk was at a loss to know how he should interpret her attitude. There was nothing shy in her manner and no unnatural restraint. There was nothing, even, to indicate that she was the girl whom he had met that morning on the hillside. She preserved an unruffled calm that was almost haughtily indifferent—but behind it Kirk felt there was a curbed passion that was ready to break loose, awaiting only the occasion. He became aware suddenly that it was going to be hard to live all summer here and be on bad terms with his nearest neighbor.

The next morning Marion Curtis left with Jule Allen who was taking her out as far as Dags' cabin. They would reach there by noon and Dags would take Marion on to The Pas, allowing Jule to return the same evening. During the past two days Marion and Kirk had been so busy with the solution of the practical problems that attended their new venture that their relations had been wholly impersonal. Not once had either of them referred to the episode of the night under the trees by the lake. And when the moment came for Marion Curtis to leave there was nothing in her manner, except in the silent pressure of her hand, that conveyed any hint whatever that she remembered. But in the moment while she lingered, her hand clasped firmly in his, Kirk called himself suddenly to account. He glanced quickly at Jule Allen who stood waiting some distance away, then looked steadily into Marion's eyes.

"We have had a very pleasant as well as very busy time of it," he said slowly. "I regret just one thing."

"And that?" she asked.

"That I forgot myself."

Her face was very serious for a moment. "I don't want you to regret it," she replied and pressed his hand firmly again before she turned away.

Kirk watched them until they had passed from sight. Then he went to work.

For two weeks he strove practically night and day to accomplish the task that Marion Curtis had set. Dags had returned at the end of a week with a dozen men and a couple of teams of horses to assist in moving the equipment. A lucky drop in the temperature gave them a few days more than they had expected and ultimately proved to be the deciding factor in their undertaking.

"Thank God for those three cold days, Dagsie," Kirk commented when the work was completed. "We'd never have done it if the break-up had come on time."

"Thank God if you like," Dags muttered, "and if you have any influence there get an option on His services for at least six months. You're goin' to need Him bad."

And Dags spoke more truly than he knew. Paxton was content to allow Kirk to go ahead without obstructing him in any way. In the first place he had very little confidence in Kirk's ability to get the materials moved and ready to be put in place before the winter broke up. With his eye on the weather he cursed the three days that gave Kirk cause for rejoicing. But his

plans were founded upon something deeper and more substantial than the accidents of weather. Day after day he spent in quiet conference with his banker and his lawyer. Twice he made hurried trips to Winnipeg and lunched with men of political influence, or called his clients together while they discussed the most effective means of obstructing Henry Tyne's efforts. And on each occasion he returned to The Pas beaming with confidence. Generally speaking, things were going very well for Warren K. Paxton.

For two weeks the prospect of a railway being built from The Pas to the mines had occupied his attention almost to the exclusion of everything else. Taking his cue from conversations he had had privately with railroad officials and others, he had sketched roughly the route which the road would probably take. Through a country that was a veritable network of rivers and lakes the problem of building a railway became largely one of avoiding bodies of water too large to cross. A few minutes' study of the map that hung in Paxton's office made it clear that whatever the exact route of the new railway would be, at one point, at least, there would be no choice of route. Between the Burntwood system of waterways sloping towards the north and the Saskatchewan system draining towards the south there lay, at one point, only a narrow strip of dry ground, scarcely more than a mile in width. To the north of the portage lay Cranberry Lake and to the south Lake Athapapuskow; the railway would have to follow the narrow height of land between them. Whether that narrow gateway to the mines should be opened or closed depended now upon Paxton's wishes in the matter. The ground was his and he would have to be sought out and bargained with before any right-of-way privileges were granted. The deeds showing the transfer of the claims covering the height of land were even now secure in the tight little safe that occupied one corner of his office. All he had to do was wait. In fact Paxton believed in waiting for anything he wanted. He prided himself on having a little more endurance than most men; his experience in the business world had gone far towards justifying the pride he felt.

Paxton sat with his feet perched on one corner of his desk and looked from his office window. Fully a month had passed since the visit of Marion Curtis and now, with the spring opening and the summer before him, he was calculating to himself just how long it would take for old Henry Tyne to reach the end of his resources and accept defeat. He knew what the extent of those resources was. He had worked out to his own satisfaction just how far they would go. He was satisfied that long before the end of September, the date that marked the expiration of Tyne's option on the Micmac, more capital would be needed or the development of the property would have to cease. And he knew, moreover, that Tyne's only hope of raising more capital

lay in the development of the property itself during the next three months. If the tests they were to make showed rich bodies of ore, Tyne would have little difficulty. If the mine yielded ore of only a fair grade, the Micmac would have another failure to its credit. Everything, therefore, depended upon the energy with which Henry Tyne pushed his development work.

As for John Allen, he was beaten before he started. The only thing Paxton feared was how the old fellow would dispose of the White Squaw after all his money had been spent. But that mattered very little, after all, so long as Henry Tyne was forced to quit the game. John Allen, spiteful old fool though he was, had more sense than to attempt doing business with Henry Tyne until the latter had proven his ability to go ahead with the task he had undertaken.

The community, generally speaking, did not like Henry Tyne. Paxton had seen to that. Even their liking for Kirk Brander had paled somewhat because of his friendship for the fur-thief, Tuck Roberts. And Paxton had lost no opportunity to play upon the sentiment. Just now, as he sat looking from his window, he was awaiting the final word on Tuck's case. Tuck had asked for a speedy trial and the judge had taken an extra day to consider the evidence. Paxton had capitalized Tuck's misfortune and earnestly prayed for a conviction. His only fear was that Kirk Brander might come upon the scene before the case was settled and introduce an element of delay. But the few days of cold weather that had meant much to Kirk in his work at the mines had also delayed his coming to The Pas.

From where Paxton sat he could see the gleam of the water in the flats where the Saskatchewan had overflowed. The river was clear of ice except along its shores where the great blocks had been pushed up into white, glistening heaps that lay melting in the warm sun. Paxton knew that Kirk Brander would be on the ground in a couple of days at most.

"Let him come—we're all set," he said to himself.

And yet he knew what Kirk's coming would mean, and he could not help feeling the suspense a little.

The outside door opened and he swung round in his chair to meet Phil Roche who was entering with Joe Bedard. The expression on Phil's face caused Paxton to sit up suddenly and take his pipe from his mouth.

"Any news?" he asked abruptly.

"It's all over," Roche announced coldly. "They let him off."

"Hell!" Paxton exploded. "Let him off!"

“Yep.”

Roche nodded his head slowly and began to roll a cigarette.

“On that evidence?” Paxton mused.

“The girl did it. She’s some little witness, I’ll say,” Roche continued, half to himself. “If I ever get in wrong with Canadian law, God send me along a girl that’ll love me enough to look a judge in the eye and produce an alibi that would do credit to Judas Iscariot.”

For a long time Paxton sat without speaking. Then he got up and walked to the other side of the office.

“Were there many out to hear the decision?” he asked.

“The room was full.”

“How’d they take it?”

Roche shrugged his shoulders. “Just took it—that’s all. They know Tuck Roberts stole the furs. The judge knows it, if he’d just come down to it.”

“What do you mean—the judge knows it?” Paxton asked, and he stopped on his way to the window to look at Roche.

“He said he couldn’t convict the prisoner on the evidence but everybody who heard it knows what he thinks about it himself.”

“Let’s go up and see Cavanagh,” Paxton said suddenly taking his coat and leading the way to the door.

Five minutes later they were in Cavanagh’s office. Paxton and Roche took chairs facing Cavanagh while Joe Bedard who had come along at Roche’s suggestion stood by the door, cap in hand, looking a little uncomfortable and out of place in the constable’s office.

Paxton threw his coat open brusquely and laid his hand heavily on the desk in front of Cavanagh.

“What’s wrong with law and authority in this place, Cavanagh?” he asked bluntly.

Cavanagh’s face bore an expression of mingled disappointment and humor.

“I’d like to have someone answer the same question for me,” he said, smiling.

“I thought you had the evidence to convict this man,” Paxton continued.

Cavanagh turned in his chair and looked from his window.

“I can’t understand why you seem to be so anxious to have Tuck Roberts sent down,” he remarked drily.

Paxton drew an impatient breath.

“Tuck Roberts is no concern of mine,” he snapped. “It would be all the same to me whether it was Tuck Roberts or Phil Roche. But the security of property and the rights of citizens in this community is my concern. And when a thief is at large in the community it is my concern.”

“It’s always better to prove that a man is a thief before you call him one,” Cavanagh remarked casually.

“Didn’t you have the proof?”

“I thought so—never was more sure of it in my life, in fact.”

“What’s the matter, then?”

Cavanagh smiled. “The judge didn’t think so.”

“Does he think Roberts is innocent?”

Cavanagh turned to Paxton and looked at him for a moment without speaking.

“It would be easy to speak unwisely, Paxton,” he said, carefully measuring his words as he spoke. “I am going to take you a little into my confidence knowing you won’t make any wrong use of what I tell you. Roberts stole those furs—everybody knows it. You can’t convict a man because you think he’s guilty. The evidence must show it. I thought the evidence was sound enough—and it was until Ruth Mackay took a hand in it.”

“There’s something radically wrong with the system or a girl’s evidence wouldn’t turn a man loose on the country when everyone knows he’s a thief.”

Cavanagh didn’t show any resentment at Paxton’s remark. He turned about again in his chair and looked out the window.

“The system is about as good as we can make it, Paxton,” he remarked quietly. “We’re just human beings, after all. If you think someone else could do the work here better than I am doing it, there is a way to go about getting a change—and I won’t block you. But while I’m in this office I’m going to take my orders from higher up.”

Phil Roche had sat without speaking throughout the conversation between Paxton and Cavanagh. Once or twice he dropped a quiet word to Joe Bedard who stood satisfying a morbid curiosity by examining a group of small posters on the wall. The fact of so many criminals being at large in spite of the rewards which were offered for their capture held a new fascination for Joe and he laboriously spelled out what he could of the descriptive details and scrutinized the portraits as closely as if he had been looking for a lost brother.

Paxton got up from his chair, drew his coat about him and turned towards the door.

“No one wants you out, Cavanagh,” he said in an effort to end the conversation pleasantly. “But it does get under a man’s hide a bit when the authorities slip a cog. It gives private citizens just that much more to lie awake over—and God knows we have enough to think about these days.”

Cavanagh remained seated. Phil Roche stepped for a moment to the side of Joe Bedard, where the two began talking quietly in undertones while Paxton and Cavanagh were bringing their discussion to a close.

“As for that,” Cavanagh was saying, “it might be better not only for Tuck Roberts but for some of his friends as well if he had been sent down for ten years. He’s going to be under suspicion from this time on and we’re going to watch him.”

“And his friends?” Paxton suggested.

“Well, when a man is under suspicion his friends naturally come in for their share of it.”

Neither of them saw Joe Bedard put his finger on one of the pictures on the wall and smile darkly as he drew Phil Roche’s attention to it. They were too intent upon their own conversation to notice the question in Phil’s face as he looked closely at the picture and then at Joe’s face.

Joe Bedard did not turn his eyes to Phil. His face wore still the dark slow smile and he grunted rather than spoke the words that were the answer to Phil Roche’s questioning look—“That’s Tuck.”

Phil stepped back and then looked more closely at the picture. Only after he had studied it for a full minute did the features begin to take on something familiar. He was on the point of speaking to Cavanagh but his own uncertainty made him hesitate. The next moment Paxton was bidding Cavanagh good-bye and the three left the office and went into the street.

“We’ve got these fellows where we want them, Phil,” Paxton said as they walked down the street together. “I’m glad Roberts wasn’t sent down. He’ll be a good man to keep round. Brander’ll wish he could send Roberts down himself to get him out of the way. They’re discredited here right now and—we’ll keep ’em there!”

He struck his fist into his hand to emphasize his point. Roche’s mind was so busy with a new interest, however, that he scarcely heard Paxton’s words. He was impatient to be alone with Joe Bedard for a few moments in order to question the half-breed and search his convictions.

Ten minutes later they left Paxton and Roche came at once to the question that was in his mind.

“Do you think that’s Tuck’s picture, Joe?” he asked.

Joe Bedard merely smiled in reply.

Roche grew suddenly impatient with the half-breed’s non-communicative manner. “Hell, man, what makes you think so?” he snapped.

“Huh!” Joe grunted, the smile never leaving his face. “I know.”

For a minute or so Roche did not speak. Then he laid a hand on Joe Bedard’s arm.

“Keep this dark, Joe,” he warned.

“Huh!” the half-breed grunted, smiling still.

CHAPTER XV.

Late in the evening of the third day following Paxton's conversation with Cavanagh, Kirk Brander arrived in his canoe with old man Dags. For Paxton the three days had been filled with effort that gave promise of glorious success. Already Tuck Roberts was practically outlawed in the community and public opinion with regard to Kirk Brander was simply awaiting his coming and some announcement of his position before it should crystallize either in his favor or against him. In fact Kirk's fate at the hands of the community gossips had practically been settled already—and for two reasons. In the first place it was generally conceded that he would stand by Tuck Roberts. He was that kind of a man. In addition to that fact, Paxton had made use of every moment of those three days to discredit not only Kirk Brander himself, the bosom friend of a fur-thief, but Henry Tyne and Marion Curtis who were unknown except for their reported connection with the new development of the Micmac. Two companies having already failed in their attempts to make the big mine pay, there was a general feeling that another such failure would have a disastrous effect upon the whole district. And Paxton spared no pains to make it clear that a third failure was precisely what they might all look forward to if Henry Tyne should go on with the work.

It was, consequently, a very different town that Kirk Brander came back to after his absence of about a month. He sensed the difference first when, within fifteen minutes after his arrival with Dags, he entered Wu Long's place in search of something to eat. It was already quite dark and he had come down the street without having been noticed by anyone. When he threw open the door of the Northern Lights and stepped into the room he saw several of his friends and called out a general greeting.

"Howdy!" he sang out as he stood and glanced round the room.

A half dozen games of cards were in progress and three or four small groups stood about or lounged round on chairs tilted back against the wall. There was a general stir at the sound of his voice and he shook hands with two or three who stood nearest the door. Wu Long was there with his smile and hobbled across to exchange greetings with Kirk, after which he hurried away to fill the order Kirk gave him for himself and Dags.

It was not until they had got well under way with their meal that Kirk found time to inquire concerning Tuck Roberts. He was about to ask the news of some who were sitting at a game of cards round the table immediately behind him, but even as he was on the point of framing the question a strange feeling came over him. He realized in a vague, indefinite way that these men whom he had counted among his friends were different from the friends of a month or so before. They had done nothing, had said nothing to make him uncomfortable and yet—he was uncomfortable just the same. There had been a certain restraint in their manner, they showed it even now in the apparent lack of enthusiasm for the games they were playing. And Kirk, with his question in mind, wondered if by any possible chance Tuck Roberts had been sent down and they were keeping the news from him, knowing how it would hurt. The thought disturbed him deeply, chilled him almost, for the thought of Tuck's being actually guilty in spite of what he had said, not only to himself but to Ruth Mackay, was far more than he had counted on.

In the moment while he hesitated the door opened and Warren Paxton entered. He stepped briskly through the room looking apparently for a table. When his eyes encountered those of Kirk Brander his thin veneer of smile spread over his face and he came forward to the place opposite Kirk and Dags. It was practically the only vacant place in the room and Paxton sat down with an air of accepting the inevitable that showed through the smile in spite of himself.

Though he did not offer to shake hands with either Kirk or Dags he was evidently determined to make their meeting as pleasant as possible at any rate.

“Back again, eh?” he said in his best manner as he drew his chair close. “How's the big work going?”

In Kirk's heart there was no real resentment towards Paxton. He regarded him simply as an antagonist in a fair fight where victory would go to the man who planned the more wisely, worked the harder, and proved himself the more resourceful. That Paxton had spoken unpleasantly to him on a couple of occasions did not disturb him in the least. Loud words and warnings of the kind that Paxton had used in talking to Kirk belonged, after all, to certain men's methods of doing business. Above all he harbored no grudge. And in the end, if Paxton succeeded in driving them from the field, Kirk Brander would be the first to congratulate him. He met Paxton's questions frankly, therefore, and his voice was pleasant as he spoke.

“Going fine,” he replied with enthusiasm. “In six months it’s going to be the most talked-of mine in Canada. In a year and a half we’ll have a railroad and a smelter. In two years we’ll have a town with electric lights and movies and five thousand people.”

Paxton’s smile widened as Kirk spoke. “You sure are some dreamer, Brander,” he replied. “I could almost feel sorry for you if my time wasn’t spent trying to break you.”

Kirk laughed aloud.

“Keep talking like that,” Kirk said, “I like it. So long as we can get it out of our systems like this there won’t be any hard feelings. By the way, what’s the latest word about Tuck?”

The question hit Paxton rather suddenly. The smile vanished from his face and his manner became at once more cautious and deliberate.

“You haven’t heard?” he asked.

“Just got in about fifteen minutes ago.”

“They let him off.”

Kirk put down his knife and fork and seized Dags by the shoulders so violently that the latter almost choked on something he was in the act of swallowing.

“Dagsie, Tuck’s off!” he almost shouted.

“Do that again,” Dags remarked when he had recovered his voice, “and I’ll have him pinched and sent down.”

“You didn’t expect him to be convicted?” Paxton asked with a sly upward look across the table at Kirk.

“I knew he didn’t take that fur—he’s not that kind of a man,” Kirk replied with directness. “But you never can tell what a lawyer will prove or what a judge will think.”

“And you never can tell what others will think, either,” Paxton remarked very casually.

Kirk gave no heed to Paxton’s words. He was busy with his own thoughts. “I’ll have to find Tuck and give him my blessing,” he observed as if he were talking to himself.

“He’ll likely drop in here before we’re through,” Dags suggested, a little unwilling that his first hour in town should be ruffled by any unnecessary

excitement.

“He may,” Paxton commented, “but the fact is he hasn’t been round much since the first day he came out.”

“Not even for a celebration?” Kirk enquired.

“Celebration? There wasn’t any. A man can’t hold a celebration by himself.”

Kirk looked up quickly. Paxton’s face was lowered, his eyes fixed on the food before him.

“There’s something not just right about this, Paxton,” Kirk said with a directness that caused Dags to turn and look at him and then nudge him with his knee.

“Don’t nudge me, Dagsie,” Kirk commanded abruptly. “I’m not seeking advice now. I’m trying to get clear on some things that are beginning to worry me some.”

He turned again to Paxton.

“You said Tuck Roberts was let off, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“The judge let him off—clear?”

“Sure—found him not guilty.”

Kirk thought a moment with his eyes still on Paxton.

“Then what’s wrong? Why isn’t he round the same as always? Why can’t he find someone to celebrate? What’s wrong?”

Kirk’s voice had risen slightly as he spoke and a number of those who were near him turned their attention to the conversation between him and Paxton.

“What’s wrong?” Kirk repeated.

“Ask them!” Paxton replied, waving his hand towards the men.

“I’m asking you.”

Paxton’s anger got the better of him. “You can’t badger me, young fellow,” he said, sitting up and looking across the table at Kirk. “Everybody in this town, including Tuck Roberts himself, knows who took those furs and if it hadn’t been for his little half-breed wench he’d be doing time right now.”

Kirk battled against the impulses that were rising within him. He got up from his chair and stooping above Paxton with his hands on the table, spoke in a voice that forced itself from between clenched teeth.

“Paxton, you ought to know better than to take refuge behind your years. If you were fifteen years younger I’d make you eat those words before you left this room. Get up!”

Paxton did not move. With a sudden sweep of his hand Kirk threw the table back against the wall and bent above Paxton gripping him by the collar of his coat.

“Get up, damn you!” he said and pulled Paxton to his feet.

“Take your hands off me or I’ll have you arrested,” Paxton roared.

Kirk gave no heed to the warning, however. Pushing Paxton before him, he made for the door and opening it with one hand, shoved him out into the street. Kirk stood a moment in the doorway listening to Paxton’s muttered curses. Someone came out with the latter’s hat and coat, and Kirk, turning back, closed the door behind him and faced the men in the room.

“If anyone has anything to say about this,” he said, and his voice was steady as he spoke, “get it off your chest now. Tuck Roberts is my friend — so is Ruth Mackay. Now, then!”

He waited a moment but no one spoke.

“Your coffee’s gettin’ cold, Kirk,” Dags announced flatly from his place at the table which he had restored to its position during the excitement.

The door opened behind Kirk suddenly and Tuck Roberts entered. Kirk glanced round, then leaped to his feet.

“Tuck, you old siwash!” Kirk cried and threw his arms about him.

And gradually, while the two sat down at the table and talked over the events of the past three or four weeks, the men in the room laid down their cards, got up from the tables and went out.

During the days that immediately followed, Kirk had ample opportunity to observe Paxton’s methods at first hand. The fact that on the day after his altercation with Paxton he was called before the local magistrate and made to pay a fine for assaulting him only added to the humor of the situation as Kirk saw it. There was something ludicrous about a man using a police magistrate to fight his battles for him in a country where magistrates at best seemed out of place. He paid his fine, accordingly, and proceeded forthwith

to make a joke of it. Paxton, on the other hand, insisted on taking the matter quite seriously and turning it to account in his efforts to discredit Kirk and go as far as possible towards outlawing him in the community.

It was not long before Kirk realized precisely what his position was. He suffered no ostracism in a personal way; he went everywhere and was received with the same heartiness as ever. But when he opened a small office and set about the main purpose of his visit to The Pas—that of hiring a gang of men to take with him to the mine on the first regular trip of the boat to Sturgeon Landing—he found everywhere a lack of confidence that was maddening. For five years his word had been as good as his oath to these men. It was a new and very disturbing experience to find them ready to question him closely on every statement he made. In the end the majority of them announced simply that they had decided to join Paxton's gang.

After three days of disappointment and partial failure, Kirk saw that other tactics would have to be employed if he was to have his gang ready and his full equipment together in time for the first boat. He called Dags and Tuck Roberts and together they went over the situation. To Tuck he assigned the task of letting the contract for feeding the men and arranging all details connected with it. Dags' practical experience in camp life and his good judgment prompted Kirk to make him responsible for getting the camp equipment together and ready for shipping by boat and, beyond Sturgeon Landing, by freight canoe. Kirk continued to struggle with the problem of getting competent men to assist in the work of sinking the shafts. Henry Tyne had let the contract for this part of the work and the foreman with a dozen men he had brought with him from Winnipeg were already at The Pas awaiting the time for their departure for the mines. At least twenty additional men would be required to get the work properly under way and these had to be found in The Pas or brought in from the outside.

In spite of Paxton's opposition, and in spite of hours of disappointment, Kirk's good nature and the genuine esteem in which he was held in the place made fair progress against all odds. Within three days of the sailing the foreman and Kirk went over their notes together. With ordinary good luck they would be ready when the time came for the boat to leave. Kirk's one anxiety was concerning the work he had set Dags to do. Something had gone wrong there. The camp equipment which Dags was to get together was not nearly ready and during the past two days Kirk had seen very little of the old fellow. After two hours of searching, he finally found Dags drunk as a lord in a room in the hotel. Kirk went immediately for Tuck and returning a few minutes later got Dags out of the room and finally into Kirk's small office.

For a half hour they questioned Dags with regard to where he had got his whisky but the old man was too far gone to give any information that would either confirm Kirk's suspicions or allay them. Both Tuck and Kirk, however, were satisfied that Dags' condition was Paxton's work. There was nothing to do but to relieve Dags of his task and divide his work between them.

When morning dawned on the day the boat was to sail Kirk and Tuck were in high spirits. Practically the last detail in their preparations had been attended to and little was left to be done except getting the men together at the wharf in time to take the boat.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, just three hours before the boat was to leave the dock, Cavanagh came to Kirk where he was superintending the loading of his equipment.

"You'd better get your men together, Brander," he advised quietly, "and get them on board."

Kirk looked at him in surprise. There was something significant in Cavanagh's manner. The constable read the question in Kirk's eyes.

"There's a little party working up and it'll be harder to get them away if you leave it any longer," he explained.

Calling Tuck, Kirk explained briefly what Cavanagh had said and the two left the docks immediately for up town. In the main street Kirk thought he sensed a feeling of rising excitement, an air of expectancy and suspense. In half an hour, with Tuck's help, he got together about half his men. Inquiries concerning the others led finally to the information that they had foregathered earlier in the afternoon in a shack on a side street, bent upon celebrating their last day in town. Kirk sent his men down to the boat with Tuck while he went off up the street, determined upon getting near enough to his men to size up the problem intelligently and decide upon some course of action.

When he opened the door of the shack without ceremony and stepped inside, his unexpected appearance brought a momentary silence upon the group. Half of them were already so intoxicated that they seemed scarcely aware of his presence. More than half the men in the shack were from Paxton's gang. That the problem was of Paxton's making there was no doubt in Kirk's mind. He controlled his first impulse which was to tear into the crowd single-handed and bring the celebration abruptly to a close.

Without speaking he turned and went out of the shack. Someone closed the door behind him as he stepped into the street. Hurrying to the dock he got Tuck and ordered his men to follow. In fifteen minutes they were before the shack and Kirk put his hand to the latch to open the door. This time, however, the door did not yield and knocking loudly he called for admittance. The noise within died down somewhat at the sound of his voice but almost immediately the din increased. Kirk repeated his summons and waited a moment to give them an opportunity to reply. When no response came he stepped back a few feet and leaping forward threw his whole weight against the door. The door gave slightly before him and one of the hinges, snapped. A second time he flung himself against it. The door flew back suddenly and dangled from one hinge against the wall. Kirk stepped into the room followed by Tuck and a half dozen of his men.

“Get out of here!” he commanded seizing one of his men by the shoulder and turning him towards the door.

The fellow went willingly enough and was taken charge of by Kirk’s men outside. But Kirk’s act was taken as a signal for resistance on the part of the others, especially those who were of Paxton’s gang. At a cry of warning from Tuck Roberts, Kirk turned in time to see one of the latter raising an empty bottle. It was no mere threat; in another instant the bottle would have come hurling towards him. But Kirk was beside his assailant with a leap and a blow that sent him sprawling against the wall.

At once the fight became general with Kirk and Tuck and their half dozen men in the thick of it. A table that stood against the wall crashed to the floor under the weight of two lurching assailants. But in little more than five minutes it was all over. Kirk’s men, drunken and protesting but considerably sobered as a result of the melee, were all outside the shack and were being hustled off to the boat by the men whom Kirk had brought along with him.

Kirk stood a moment in the open doorway and looked back at the men who were still in the shack. There was no move on the part of any of them to continue the struggle and Kirk waited long enough to give his men a chance to get safely out of the way. Then he drew the rickety door into place, fastened it as well as he could from the outside and hurried away.

When he was half way down the street a shout came to him from the direction of the docks. Sensing more trouble, to which the few minutes in the shack had been merely a curtain-raiser, Kirk quickened his pace to a run until he rounded the corner of the street leading to the dock. What he saw

more than justified his fears. Thirty or forty men were engaged in a rough-and-tumble battle close to the dock where the boat was moored. A little way back from the scene of the struggle a crowd of spectators looked on, their numbers being added to as others came hurrying from all directions.

For a moment only Kirk stood watching the fight from a distance. He could distinguish some of his own men sufficiently clearly to realize that they were grappling with men from Paxton's outfit. It was a gang fight, one gang fighting to keep the other from boarding the boat before it left the dock. The captain and his boat hands looked on from the railing of the upper deck, smoking their pipes and evidently enjoying the action keenly. Kirk looked quickly about to see if Cavanagh or Keene were on hand but they were nowhere in evidence. If they would only stay in the background until the affair was settled, Kirk thought, so much the better.

Someone brushed past him roughly as he was about to start for the scene of the fight. Old Dags, sober enough now, was making for the docks as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Come on, Kirk," he shouted. "Let's give 'em hell!"

Kirk could not help smiling at the old man's eagerness and followed him into the thick of the fight. For a few minutes there was little to the struggle except indiscriminate whacking and punching and mauling, in which feet as well as hands were brought freely into play. Once or twice Kirk caught sight of Tuck Roberts who, hat off and shirt sleeves in ribbons, was plunging in recklessly and apparently enjoying the time of his young life. Dags had disappeared from sight completely. But Kirk was looking for someone else. He knew that somewhere in the tumbling, striking mass Phil Roche was probably giving a willing hand to the support of Paxton's crew. When he finally caught sight of him, Roche was standing on the far side of the crowd near the edge of the dock, his back to the river, leisurely smoking a cigarette and assuming the role of a mere spectator. Beside him was Warren Paxton himself, smoking his cigar and apparently enjoying the action as much as anyone though he had not soiled his clothes by taking any active part in it.

The sight of the two standing apart from the fight that they were undoubtedly responsible for maddened Kirk beyond expression. To reach them he would have to fight his way through the mass. In a moment he had plunged in. Right and left he struck, smashing his way through and leaving any who attempted to bar his progress stretched on the ground before he turned to the next. The result of his entering the fight was noticeable at once. Everywhere his men were now sweeping forward towards the boat, breaking

down opposition with a movement that quickly gathered speed and in another minute the struggle would have been over.

But catching sight of Kirk in the centre of the crowd and realizing that affairs were taking an unfavorable turn, Roche stepped in, seized a couple of his men who were being driven back towards the dock, threw them back into the fight and then plunged towards Kirk. They were several yards apart and every foot of the distance that separated them would have to be fought over before they came within reach of each other.

Almost at the same moment that Roche entered the fight, Dags, dishevelled, battered-looking but still fierce, emerged from the crowd and confronted Paxton. A few words passed between them while Dags waited to give him time to defend himself. Paxton looked scornfully a moment at the old fellow but when Dags stepped suddenly towards him, his expression changed. Realizing that he was going to be forced to take a hand in the fight, Paxton stepped back quickly and seized a heavy stick that lay on the dock at his feet. Dags was upon him in a moment. Though Paxton raised the club and brought it down again as quickly and as savagely as he could, Dags was too quick for him. Dropping the stick at the same moment that Dags, having crouched suddenly to avoid the blow, seized him round the knees, Paxton began pawing with his hands in a futile effort to get a hold that would give him at least a fair chance of defending himself. Dags lost no time, however, in following up his advantage. For a moment or two he tugged and lifted with all the strength at his command. Then straightening suddenly he struck out almost at once with both hands. When Paxton stepped back from the force of the blows he tottered on the edge of the dock. But Dags was in a fight—a fight, moreover, in which his opponent had attacked him with a club heavy enough to have broken his head had the blow landed. With an oath that seemed bitten off between clenched teeth he sprang once more at Paxton. Realizing the hopelessness of his position Paxton turned away slightly to avoid the blow, collapsed and went over the edge of the dock. Dags did not pause long enough even to hear the splash, to say nothing of the sputtering that followed. Leaving Paxton to his own resources and to the tender mercies of a couple of spectators who came up to offer their aid, he turned back again into the crowd.

By this time the fight had passed the critical stage. Everywhere Paxton's men had been beaten back and half of Kirk's men were already on board. In the space that had thus been cleared of men, Kirk and Phil Roche were pitted against each other in a fight that was more furious than anything that day. A ring of spectators had closed in about the pair, divided in their

sympathies, but cheering and calling incessantly as the two men threw caution to the winds in their desire to end matters as quickly as possible.

Suddenly there was a flurry on the outside of the crowd. The ranks of the spectators broke and gave way before Cavanagh and Keene who with a half dozen mounties and deputies pushed their way through and surrounding the two men, tore them apart.

“Quit it, boys!” Cavanagh said quietly. “Quit it, now, and lay off this stuff!”

The deputies dispersed the crowd and in less than a minute Kirk was on his way to the boat with Cavanagh while Roche was being led away by Keene and a couple of his men.

“Come on, Kirk,” Tuck called as Kirk stepped up the gang-plank. “Some little party, eh?”

Kirk grinned. “Oh, boy!” he said, and the two shook hands.

“But did you see Dags?” asked Tuck.

“Dags? No, what — —”

For answer Tuck laughed and turned Kirk about for a look at Paxton where he was walking away dripping from the plunge he had taken off the dock. While they laughed together at Paxton Dags came to them, his face marked and his eyes staring from excitement.

“Dagsie, old boy, put it there!” Kirk cried giving the old fellow his hand. “But believe me, Dags, you’ve started something.”

Half an hour later the boat left its moorings and moved leisurely into the current of the Saskatchewan.

CHAPTER XVI.

Within a week after Kirk and his men arrived at the Micmac, Paxton, accompanied by Phil Roche and about twenty men arrived on the Ripple Creek property and began work. Old John Mackay had come from The Pas and had quietly gone to live in his cabin about a quarter of a mile from Kirk's camp where he could watch the work going on from a comfortable distance and not seem in any way to be interfering. For the old prospector had grown very anxious of late over the future of his mine. He had seen two attempts to develop his property end in failure and realized fully what the significance of a third failure would be. And Paxton had left nothing undone to shake John Mackay's confidence in the future of his property, now that it was in the hands of Henry Tyne. It was with mixed feelings, therefore, that he got from his bunk and going down to the water's edge to wash in those early spring mornings, listened to the sounds of the work that was going on in the two camps. Once out of sheer loneliness and prompted by a feeling of his own helplessness where men like Warren Paxton and Henry Tyne were fighting it out over his head, he swallowed his pride and walked over to see John Allen. They had not met on friendly terms since the day he had left John Allen's cabin and gone to live by himself. But he felt sure that John Allen shared some of his uneasiness at the presence of outsiders whose power was money and whose sense of values had long been distorted because it had been permitted no expression except what it could find in terms of dollars and cents. Half an hour later he returned to his cabin disconsolate and out of sorts with the world in general—John Allen had gone to The Pas for his outfit. He put his canoe into the water and spent the day moving about from island to island and from bay to bay enjoying the luxury of supreme idleness. He only hoped that John Allen—stubborn old fool that he was—would not become like one of these outsiders.

Nor was John Mackay the only one who watched the growth of the two camps with wondering and misgiving. Day after day Jule Allen sat on the great rock above the falls and listened to the sounds that came first from one camp and then from the other. Often she drew her big dog Snap down beside her and confided fears that she scarcely knew how to express. The world she had known as her own was being invaded by strangers. Even now, with the work only beginning, she felt that the place was no longer her own. She had gone about freely for years, had romped and played over ground that she

called her own without finding anyone to dispute the claim. Already, she felt, the limits of her freedom were being set by the newcomers. To her it seemed that her sacred rights were being outraged.

And yet, she told herself, she should be happy at the thought that some day a town with hundreds, even thousands of people would spring up on the very ground she had called hers. Her father had told her so, though she never quite knew whether her father was happy in the prospect or not. He only knew that he had determined upon a course of action that would make him as strong a man as these who were coming in from the outside. Her father at any rate was no outsider. These others she despised because she knew that they cared no more for the country she loved than people did who had never heard of it. They would come in for what they could get, stay until they had taken it and then disappear as suddenly as they had come. Her father had reminded her of that, too, though she had felt it instinctively before he mentioned it.

Paxton and Tyne were mere names to Jule Allen, names that she hated equally and without discrimination. Phil Roche she thought of frequently, now that he had come to superintend operations on Paxton's property, but never with sentiment. The months that had passed since the unfortunate affair at Cumberland House had practically effaced even the memory of what she had once felt towards him. Nor did it ever occur to her to be afraid of him. It was as if he had never existed for her, as if his stories of big cities and crowded streets had never been told. Towards Kirk Brander she was without feeling except annoyance over what had occurred that day on the hillside. Somehow she associated Kirk with Marion Curtis. He was as much a stranger to her as if he had just come from the city to assist in exploiting the mines and to get out again when his work was done.

And so she watched both camps and listened to the shouts of the men and the grinding of chains and wheels and the cold hard rattle of the ore in the buckets, and felt herself very far from it all.

Kirk Brander came in from his cold plunge in the lake and began brisk preparations for supper. Lying on the bunk in one corner of the cabin was old man Dags taking a few minutes' sleep before the cook-house gong should sound. Tuck Roberts in a homemade easy chair sat by the window lazily turning the pages of a magazine two months old. Bingo lay near the door with his snout between his paws.

“Booh!” Kirk said as he broke through the open doorway and startled Dags out of his sleep. “That water sure has pep in it. You ought to get into it, Tuck.”

He began drying his hair vigorously with a fresh towel.

“You can have it,” Tuck drawled with his chin on his chest.

“I wish your damn’ lake’d freeze over!” Dags exploded, rolling out of the bunk and preparing to take a modest wash in the basin that stood just outside the door.

The work in the camp had been in full swing for a month with gangs of men working in double shifts so that not an hour of the twenty-four was lost. Even as they waited for the gong to summon them to supper the ground beneath their feet shook perceptibly from the shock of the explosions in the shafts. The regular puffing that came from the engine house, the noisy rattle of the lifts in the shafts, the metallic roar of the rock tumbling out of the carriers and rolling down the side of the ore dump, all gave evidence of life and activity. From the lake came the laboured chug-chug of a gasoline launch towing in a raft of wood that was almost too much for it. Standing in groups about the camp, within easy distance of the cook camp, the day shift waited the summons to supper.

Kirk came to the doorway of his cabin and stood for a moment looking across the lake to where the little launch was struggling with its load.

“If it wasn’t a dead calm he’d never make it with that load,” he commented.

“He thinks he’s takin’ a rise out of the Almighty,” Dags replied, wiping his hands dry in the towel as he stood and gazed across the lake.

Kirk’s eyes shifted until they rested upon the camp on the opposite shore of the lake. A little to the left, Ripple Creek entered the lake and in the brief moments of silence that came occasionally unbroken by the noises from the camps, Kirk could hear the muffled roar of the rapids before Jule Allen’s cabin.

For reasons that are best known to the young, Kirk Brander had come to think of the cabin back there among the trees as Jule Allen’s cabin. He had seen nothing of either Jule or her father since he had come back from The Pas with his men and had begun work. He knew only from his own freighters and the men who brought in the mail that John Allen had gone to The Pas nearly a month ago to get his equipment loaded and shipped in. From time to time his men had reported the progress the old Englishman

was making and he knew that by this time John Allen would be somewhere north of Sturgeon Landing on the most hazardous stages of his journey. Many times during the past month Kirk had thought of going to see Jule Allen. He felt that he should do something to make amends for the unfortunate manner of their first meeting. Besides, Tuck Roberts was in the habit of spending a great deal of his time with old John Mackay. Soon Ruth would come to live with her father and Kirk knew that from then on he would see little of Tuck except when they were at work during the day. Frequently, more in fun than anything else, he had threatened to leave Tuck and Dags and spend the evening with Jule Allen. But John Allen's absence and the fact that he was not likely to be well received anyhow, made him decide to await a more propitious moment.

Tuck emerged from the cabin and broke abruptly upon his reveries.

"Any sign of the mail yet?" he asked, casting his eyes in the same direction as Kirk was looking.

"You ought to go and meet them," Kirk smiled in reply.

The sound of the supper gong brought to a sudden end the little scuffle that followed Kirk's remark, and they hurried off together with Dags following closely.

During the supper hour news came of the arrival of the mail, and Kirk and Tuck left the table early to go to the little office where the mail was received. When they had opened the sacks and sorted the letters, they took up the bundles of magazines and papers and the letters that were theirs and went into their cabin.

For an hour they were so absorbed that neither had anything to say to the other. Once Tuck, commanding a manner as casual as possible, announced that Ruth Mackay was coming to live with her father in less than a week. Kirk received the announcement with little show of interest. A long letter from Marion Curtis and another from Henry Tyne engrossed his attention. Both letters were outwardly optimistic and yet Kirk could not help feeling that they were meeting new difficulties in raising the funds necessary for their enterprise. Nothing, Kirk realized, but the unobstructed development of the mine and, in addition to that, the possible uncovering of new bodies of high grade ore would establish the confidence in their undertaking, without which they would seek substantial credits in vain. The effect of the letters was to make Kirk even more determined than ever to swing his end of the work along smoothly.

He looked up from his letters suddenly as Dags entered the doorway.

“John Allen’s home,” Dags announced.

“When?” Kirk asked.

“The boys brought him in with them.”

“The boys?”

“The mail. The old man’s just about done for.”

There was a note of genuine sympathy in Dags’ voice.

“Something wrong, Dags?” Kirk asked.

“Lost everything at the upper rapids on Rat Creek,” Dags replied. “A cable slipped when they were trackin’ the rapid and — —” He made a motion with his hands indicating that everything had been swept away.

Kirk and Tuck were struck dumb at the announcement. Dags sat down on the edge of his bunk and lighting his pipe, smoked a moment in silence.

“He never should ’a’ done it,” he observed finally. “It’s just like temptin’ God Almighty.”

“I’m going over to see the old man,” Kirk said, going to the doorway and looking out at the lake.

“It might be a good idea,” Dags remarked. “The boys say there’s nothin’ left to him at all. Paxton came back again to-day, too.”

Kirk took his hat from the wall and without a word to either Tuck or Dags left the cabin and when he reached the limits of the camp, followed the narrow trail that ran through the woods towards John Allen’s cabin. In ten minutes he stood before the open door and with hat in hand spoke John Allen’s name.

Jule Allen came from a small room at the back of the cabin and stood for a moment before him. It was evident that she expected him to tell her his business if he had any. And yet, in spite of her uninviting demeanor, he could see that in her heart she was deeply troubled and that he was more welcome at that moment than she was prepared to admit.

“I’ve come to see John Allen,” Kirk said quietly.

Jule led the way into the room out of which she had just come. John Allen lay in bed, his head propped against pillows, his hands lying in listless fashion on the coverlet. He turned his face slowly towards Kirk as he entered the room. Dags had reported more truly than he knew. John Allen had come to the end of his physical resources. His experiences of the past

few days had broken him so that he was little more than a ghost of his former self.

“I’ve come to see you,” Kirk said as he advanced and took the old man’s hand in his. “And I want to tell you that I’m sorry for what has happened. It was hard luck.”

John Allen motioned Kirk to a seat and then for a moment closed his eyes. After a long silence he turned his head and looked at Kirk.

“It was more than hard luck, Brander,” he said in a broken voice. “It means the end—I can’t go on any more. I didn’t think one blow would take the fight out of a man—but it will—if it’s hard enough.”

“You’ll go on again, John Allen,” Kirk encouraged him. “A man doesn’t quit until he’s all in—and you’ve got something left.”

The old prospector seemed on the point of making a reply but he hesitated and moved his head impatiently. Then he looked towards the door of his room.

“Where’s the girl?” he asked.

Jule appeared immediately at the sound of her father’s voice. “What is it, father?” she asked.

“Jule,” he said quietly, “I think I’d like to see John Mackay for a while. It’s early yet. Go and tell him I want him. I’ll be all right—Brander here will stay till you come back.”

Jule left immediately and Kirk drew his chair closer to the bedside. The old prospector lifted himself a little and took his pipe and tobacco from the stand near the head of his bed. He filled it leisurely and in silence and when he had applied a match and taken a few puffs he turned his eyes towards Kirk.

“It’s all right, Brander,” he said, pointing the stem of his pipe towards Kirk to give emphasis to what he was saying, “it’s all right for you to tell me I’m going on again. But it isn’t true. You are young and don’t know what I know. When a man’s done—he’s done. It’s been a fight with me for the last year, but I thought I’d get going again when I started to work the place here. But a man of my age knows pretty well when it’s all over with him. I’ve plugged along and scrambled my way through for years in this country. But life here takes more than it gives.”

He paused a moment to puff again at his pipe, then he went on again.

"I had one chance—and it's gone. If I could have got in here with the drill and got down to work for the summer I could have shown some of you fellows what I had here. I'd have made you come to me to talk business and you'd have listened to my terms. Now—it's gone—the only real chance I ever had. I spent my last dollar and I haven't it in me to go on."

Kirk took advantage of a moment's pause. "Is there anything I could do—anything that would help?" he asked, keenly aware of his own helplessness.

"There are things—some things that might be done," John Allen admitted slowly, "but they can wait. We'll see in a few days just how I'm going to get along. I may be out again and around before very long. If anything should happen—if it happened suddenly—there'd be some things to do—yes. But the truth is, Brander, I can't trust outsiders. You're all right—never heard anything to the contrary—but Paxton wouldn't stop at anything. I don't know Tyne, but I suspect they're all alike, Brander, and so long as you're one of them—you're one of them."

"I wish you could talk for half an hour to Henry Tyne," Kirk suggested. "He's not—"

"You don't see things as I do, Brander," the old prospector interrupted. "These fellows from the city don't care for this country except for what they can grab and carry away with them. With us it's different. This is the place I've come to live. It's my home and I want to stay here and, when the time comes, die here, too. That's what makes the difference. That's what makes it hard to put any faith in outsiders. When they are through with the country there will be nothing left to show that we've been here except some holes in the ground, some worked-out shafts, a few broken-down cabins, and a few hills stripped bare of trees."

He paused abruptly and looked towards the door.

"I thought I heard someone coming," he said.

As he spoke a knock sounded at the door and to John Allen's summons, Warren Paxton entered from the outside and found his way to the doorway of the room. When his eyes fell upon Kirk he paused abruptly and waited for John Allen to bid him enter. The old prospector merely spoke Paxton's name and motioned with his hand.

Paxton came forward briskly. "I hear you've had a run of bad luck, John," he said with an evident effort at cheerfulness.

John Allen didn't reply at once, and Paxton turned to Kirk, his teeth showing through his smile. "Bumps come to the best of us, Brander," he remarked.

"Even the oldest of us," Kirk replied.

"Youth or age doesn't really count," Paxton smiled.

"Except that the younger you are the quicker you are on the come-back," Kirk retorted.

Paxton laughed a little and turned to John Allen.

"This will change your plans a bit, John," he remarked drily.

Though he waited for a reply, John Allen did not speak.

"As a matter of business, simply, I want you to know that I'm prepared to open the question of the White Squaw any time you feel like it," he continued.

John Allen made an impatient gesture which Paxton picked up quickly. "We won't talk of that now, of course," he explained. "In the meantime, if there's anything I can do, just call on me. I'd be glad to help you in any way possible."

"Thanks," murmured John Allen.

"We're neighbors here, John," Paxton continued, following up what looked like a small advantage, "and in this country neighbors are few and far between. Count on me if I can be of any service."

"It's neighbors we need in this country, Mr. Paxton," John Allen commented, "need them badly."

But Paxton did not catch the significance of the remark. Kirk on the other hand found a strange satisfaction in knowing precisely what John Allen meant.

"I've brought in a bit of fresh news to you," Paxton went on after a pause in the conversation. "I had a trip to Winnipeg this time and secured a lease on the falls to develop power. Before another year we'll have your cabin lighted with electricity, John."

Kirk sensed at once the effect the announcement would have on the old prospector. He could not understand how Paxton could be so thick-skinned as not to see how the news would be taken. John Allen turned suddenly towards Paxton and his face went white.

“You don’t mean our falls—the falls in the creek here?” he asked in a voice that plainly expressed his bewilderment.

“Yes—certainly,” Paxton replied. “Why not?”

“Why not? Why, man—my girl—don’t you understand—she won’t let you do that!”

Paxton’s smile broadened. “That’s just sentiment,” he reminded the old man, “and a girl’s sentiment, at that. Practical men— —”

“I’m a practical man, Paxton,” John Allen interrupted in a voice that was quickly getting out of control, “and I’m going to tell you that as long as I live you’re not going to put your hands on the power in that waterfall.”

Paxton’s impatience was quite evident.

“But I’ve got the lease—I can go ahead when I’m ready,” he insisted.

“Go ahead!” John Allen replied. “Try it! For years my girl has gone there to rest, she has taken her work there and sat for hours above it, it’s been to her like a—like a house of God, Paxton, and the first man that puts a hand to changing it will have to reckon with me.”

As he spoke there came the sound of footsteps from without and in a moment Jule Allen entered followed by old John Mackay. Paxton got up from where he had been sitting and left abruptly muttering a few words of greeting to the newcomers and a brief word or two of leave-taking that John Allen did not hear.

For a few moments John Mackay stood in the doorway and looked at John Allen in silence.

“Something wrong, John?” asked John Mackay.

John Allen put out his hand and the two old prospectors gripped hands in a long and silent reconciliation.

“I’ve been hit hard,” remarked John Allen. “I don’t think there’ll be much more to tell.”

“The girl has told me,” said John Mackay, sitting down and taking his pipe from his pocket.

Jule had already withdrawn and Kirk felt that the two old men would be more comfortable if left alone. He got up and with a brief good-bye reminded John Allen that he would help if he could, and went out.

He found Jule Allen standing alone in the doorway of the cabin. As he approached she stepped out and moved slowly towards the narrow trail that led from the cabin to the rock above the falls. Kirk watched her for a few moments and then, closing the cabin door behind him quietly, followed after her without speaking.

When they had come to the rock, they stood a moment and looked down along the creek to where the lake showed in the wide opening between the trees on either bank. The sun had gone down and the twilight had already begun to set in. A tint of purple lay upon the water of the lake, purple and turquoise blue, and beyond stretched the long shore line with its shadows of black-pointed spruce in silhouette against an amber sky. A long way off, the low shore was but a ragged bar of smoky blue and the light on the water a mere dusky gray. The colors had faded from the rocks nearby and they lay dead against the background of shaded shore.

Kirk turned his eyes from the lake and the wooded shores and looked at Jule.

"I've come out here to tell you that there's trouble ahead for you, Jule Allen," he said quietly, "and to tell you that I'm going to help you whether you want me to or not."

When she turned to him her face was troubled and her glance was searching.

"Do you think he can't get over it?" she asked.

"Let's be straight," Kirk replied. "He's too hard hit."

"I know it," she said, turning away to hide the tears that were rising to her eyes.

"If it will help any," Kirk went on, "tell him that Paxton will never lay a hand on the water power of Ripple Creek while I'm alive."

She turned quickly to look at Kirk.

"I don't understand — — I — —"

"He'll tell you all about it," Kirk explained. "Paxton has been over again. Just tell John Allen what I have said. It may help him to rest a little easier."

Kirk turned away and followed the trail that led back to camp. He paused a moment just where the trail disappeared among the trees and

looked back. Jule Allen was standing still where he had left her. Her face was turned towards him.

“Good-bye,” he called, as a challenge to the gentler nature that he knew was hers if she only permitted it expression.

She did not speak but while he waited he saw her lift her hand once towards him and when he turned again into the trail he was lighter at heart than he had been for weeks.

CHAPTER XVII.

Though Kirk had regarded from every angle the proposal to develop water power out of the falls on Ripple Creek, he could not bring himself to think that Paxton would actually go forward with the work until, at any rate, the whole question of monopoly in the district should be settled. The expense necessary to instal a power plant, Kirk knew, could hardly be justified if the power was to be used solely on Paxton's claims. If Paxton's holdings could be made to include the White Squaw and the Micmac, or even the White Squaw alone, there would be some justification for such an enterprise. The more he thought about it, and the more he talked it over with Tuck and Dags, the more convinced he was that Paxton's announcement was simply part of the game he was playing to discourage and drive others from the field. That he had secured a lease on the site there was no reason for doubting. The outlay involved would be trifling and the future might easily justify it. But Kirk had little fear that Paxton would make immediate use of the privileges he had thus secured. He was content, therefore, to wait until he saw Paxton move before he took any steps to interfere. He had quite made up his mind that he would interfere, and in a very direct manner, at the first indication that Paxton was going to promote his interests in that direction. In the meantime he had informed Henry Tyne of Paxton's avowed intentions and of his own determination to act directly and as he should think fit at the time, if Paxton should take any steps towards carrying out his plans. Whenever he thought of the matter Kirk was seized with a spirit of recklessness that caused him to disregard the fact that Paxton's actions would probably have the protection of the law while his own might lead him into difficulty with legal authority. But he was prepared for once in his life to face the consequences. If he could find grounds in the meantime for bringing the whole matter into court, so much the better. Before a decision could be handed down Henry Tyne would have had an opportunity to show what he could do with the Micmac. If their hopes were realized the future was secure and it would only be a matter of time before they could push Paxton to one side. If they failed, well, they had done all they could do and nothing else mattered.

With John Allen, a broken-down invalid, and his daughter, Jule, the case was different. Paxton's announcement had touched them both so vitally that they were unable to think quietly or to reason about the matter at all. They

were prepared simply to fight to the very end, with whatever means they could find, to avert what seemed to them both an unnatural outrage. Day after day John Allen weakened under the strain of his defeat. Every morning he sent Jule out on a little trip of inspection along the creek lest Paxton should make any move without his knowing it. Every evening when John Mackay paid his visit, John Allen waxed furious over the affair and when he had exhausted himself, talked long and earnestly about the future, a future in which he was convinced Jule would have to go on alone. Jule herself went often now for comfort and companionship to Ruth Mackay, who had come to live with her father. And the two old prospectors, nursing their grievances against the ways of the world, watched the friendship grow and were happy.

“This can’t go on much longer, girl,” John Allen murmured one morning while Jule served him with breakfast. “We’ve got to face things, even the hardest things, with our eyes open.”

Jule came to him and kneeling beside the bed she took his hands in hers.

“You mustn’t talk like that, father,” she protested.

But John Allen shook his head. “I must talk while I can, girl, for there are some things I want you to know. I have dreamed big things for you and the dreams are all gone. But there are some things still that I’d do if I had my strength. I haven’t got the strength and I’m not going to have it back, and I want you to go on. This place is ours—yours and mine. It’s been home to us and I’d hoped some day to make it a little more than home, I wanted to see it the place where men would find work to do and be happy in doing it. It doesn’t seem possible now. These pirates are pushing in all round us. They’re going to snatch what they can and run away with it. Their homes are somewhere else. Don’t let them run off with our home, girl. When the end comes I want to lie here under our trees within sound of the water and—you know the rest. I’ve spoken to John Mackay. He’ll advise you and he’ll help you. And when the time comes—and it will come—when someone will find you here and want to take you away, tell him—tell him how you love it here and bring him to see that you can’t go. We want men here who will stay—men who will live their lives here because they have found the place their hearts have been looking for. We don’t want the other kind—the kind that tear and destroy and go away again leaving the place blasted and ugly. This place has been ours. It’ll be yours from now on. You must do with it as you please, but you must grow up to do what I would have done if I’d gone on.”

He paused and laid his hand upon Jule's head where it was bowed on the coverlet. She was weeping softly and John Allen stroked her hair very gently for a while before he continued.

"I'm not asking too much, girl," he said haltingly. "I'm only asking you to try. It may be that in the end you will find what I have found, that the task is too much. Well, don't wait too long—don't throw away your life in a fight that can't be won. All I'm asking is that you remember what I've said and that you'll dream about it and fight for it till you know you have to give up. Now, run out and take a look along the creek."

Jule got up and after kissing her father and holding him close to her for a long time silently, turned away and walked towards the door. When she looked back the tears were gone from her eyes and in their place were the fires that danced there on the afternoon when Kirk had met her on the hillside. She was John Allen's daughter as she stood there and the old man's pride rose at the sight of her. Then she whisked away quickly and was gone.

And as Jule took her way through the woods, accompanied as usual on such trips by her dog, Snap, she felt very lonely and looked about her at her trees and rocks in the hope that in these friends of her youth she might find some comfort.

It had rained during the night, a warm, early summer rain that had gone deep down into the roots where they lay bedded in the brown moss. The boughs of the spruce were a clearer green, the black boles standing very rigid, the high points scarcely moving against the gray sky. The birches huddled together in little clumps here and there seemed to dislike the feel of the wet rain on their dainty leaves. Underfoot the mosses were soft and yielding with here and there an uncovered root gleaming white above ground. Now and then Jule stopped and shook the heavy raindrops from the ground-plants or watched a chattering squirrel hurry off at Snap's approach and mount scolding to a high branch of a tree.

She left the little path she had been following and picked her way carefully among the low bushes until she reached the stony edge of the creek. Above her hung an alder bush, its soft dark branches leaning towards the water and holding their dark leaves up to the sky as if waiting for the sun to warm them.

Suddenly from a distance up the creek came the sound of voices and looking out cautiously she caught sight of Paxton and Roche getting from their canoe after having crossed from the other side of the creek. Quickly she turned and ordered Snap back to the cabin. Then she waited under the

cover of the alders while the two men drew their canoe out of the water and started towards her. When they had come within a few yards of her she withdrew a little way and crouched low behind a clump of willows until they had gone past. Then, hiding as best she could behind the trunks of spruce trees, she followed them, keeping almost within hearing distance. Concealment was not difficult; Roche and Paxton were so intent upon their own conversation that they had ears for little else.

Finally when they came within sight of the cabin they paused and stepped down closer to the edge of the creek. She moved close enough to be able to hear their voices quite clearly and then took a position behind a couple of spruce trees that stood together. And while she listened her blood grew warm and she was conscious of the quickened beating of her pulses. Paxton was evidently bent upon going on with the power project and had come out to look over the ground on both sides of the creek with Phil Roche. Though she could pick up only an occasional word as they spoke, Jule learned enough to know what had brought them over so early in the day.

As she thought of her father lying hopelessly ill in the cabin and then of these men laying their plans in total disregard of his helplessness, she found it almost impossible to control herself. But hard as it was to keep her rising anger in check, she would probably have succeeded had it not been for Paxton's laugh that broke loose suddenly at something Phil Roche had said. Jule had not heard the remark but Paxton's laugh was more than she could bear. She stepped quickly from her place of hiding and stood out upon a little moss-covered ledge of rock slightly above them. They did not hear her movements nor did they see her until she spoke.

"I would have you know you are trespassing on my father's property," she said.

They turned suddenly at the sound of her voice.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Allen," Paxton replied, determined, apparently, to take her words lightly.

But his greeting only served to kindle Jule's anger the more. She stepped down quickly from where she had addressed them and going up to them faced Paxton, her eyes blazing and her two fists clenched tight at her sides.

"I don't want your 'good mornings', Mr. Paxton," she declared. "You are standing where you have no right to stand without my father's permission."

Paxton's lips parted in his characteristic smile.

“We are aware of the fact,” he replied, “but now that we’re here what’s to be done about it?”

Jule took a step towards him. “You’ll go back to where you belong—you’ll not stay here!” she retorted.

Paxton turned to Roche with a look of amused tolerance on his face. Roche’s expression did not change.

“And you’ll not touch that waterfall,” Jule flashed, going still closer to Paxton and looking at him with her head held high. “It’s mine—you can’t take it—you won’t, I tell you! You think you can do what you like because he can’t help himself. If he can’t stop you I will! And I’ll do it my own way—but I’ll do it!”

Paxton looked at her as she spoke and there dawned gradually in his mind a conviction that Jule Allen meant what she said. He looked at Phil Roche again and moved uneasily. He could find nothing in Phil’s face, however, to set him at ease. He stepped abruptly past Jule and started off towards the spot where they had left their canoe.

“Come on, Phil,” he muttered half to himself, “We’ve done all we came out for anyhow.”

Phil paused only a moment to look again at Jule Allen and then followed Paxton. Jule did not move from the spot until they had passed out of sight beyond a bend in the creek. Then she turned back towards the trail that led to the cabin.

She had covered about half the distance from the creek to the trail when she was startled by the sudden appearance of Snap who leaped from the cover of some low bushes and came upon her without warning. Instinct prompted her to turn her eyes in the direction from which Snap had come to meet her. As she did so Ruth Mackay’s laugh sounded from behind a clump of birches where she had hidden herself from Jule’s view. In a moment Ruth was beside her.

“Oh, that was great!” she exclaimed, almost breathless from excitement. “I came just in time to hear it all. If they hadn’t gone when they did, I’d have sent Snap in.”

Jule gave Ruth a strange look. “I’m glad you didn’t,” she said. “It wasn’t necessary. We can beat them without dogs.”

“Yes,” Ruth persisted, “but wouldn’t it be fun to see old Paxton with a dog after him.”

They laughed heartily together at the picture their imagination presented and for a moment Jule forgot her anger. When they had ceased laughing Jule turned again to Ruth and her expression was sober.

“Joking aside, Ruth,” she said with some deliberateness, “if we ever get into trouble with Paxton you can call Snap to help settle it, but—it wouldn’t do any good if Phil Roche was there.”

Ruth was in a mood to regard Jule’s words lightly. “A dog would bite Phil Roche as quickly as anyone else,” she said, and there was an odd expression of coyness in the look she gave Jule as she spoke.

“Snap wouldn’t,” Jule replied and although Ruth wondered a little at Jule’s reply there was something in her tone of voice and in her expression when she spoke that made it impossible to pursue the subject any further.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Kirk stood in the doorway of his cabin, his eyes following the forms of two men who had taken the trail into the woods by the creek. Early that evening he had paid the two men off. Though nothing had been said on the subject, he knew that those two men were on their way to join Paxton's gang. When the men had disappeared among the trees he turned into the cabin and faced Tuck Roberts seriously.

"We've got to stop this, Tuck," he observed. "That makes nine men in the last two weeks, and four of them have gone to work for Paxton."

"Dags says it's getting worse," Tuck commented.

Kirk thought a moment. "I want you to take a look around the place to-night, Tuck," he said after a moment's silence. "I have an idea there's been something brewing for the last week or so in that bunkhouse at the other end of the row. I'll take a run over to see how old John is—I'll be back early."

Kirk was not groping his way blindly in his efforts to find an explanation of the growing discontent in the camp. The men had been as well fed as men could be, considering all the difficulties involved in getting sufficient food into the camp by freight canoes. Their quarters were just as comfortable as those supplied by Paxton for his men. It was a clear case of interference from the outside. Kirk had discharged two men who had lain off work for no apparent cause and had spent the greater part of a week lying around in the different bunkhouses and visiting the camp on the other side of the lake. They had gone to work for Paxton and for a while Kirk's men seemed to have settled back again to work. The relief was only temporary, however. In a few days mutterings began coming to Kirk's ears again and daily Tuck Roberts and old Dags brought in fresh reports of stirring discontent.

Kirk covered the trail to John Allen's cabin in long resolute strides. During more than three weeks since the old prospector had come home broken from his defeat in the rapids, Kirk had been a frequent visitor at his bedside. His visits had been of necessity brief, but the old man was failing very fast, and Kirk rarely let a day pass without spending a few minutes with him. Jule seldom put in an appearance when he was around and when she did it was usually in the company of Ruth Mackay.

As he came and stood in the open door of the cabin he saw Ruth and Jule sitting back in the shadows in one corner of the large room, very close together. Hearing the voice of John Mackay within, Kirk spoke a word of greeting and then went into the room where John Allen lay. For a long time Kirk and John Mackay talked that night, their voices so low that they could hear the heavy breathing of John Allen. The old man himself did not speak but lay for the most part with his eyes closed and his hands motionless at his sides. In spite of his promise to Tuck, Kirk found it impossible to hurry away. In the face of John Allen there was something so wistful, so weary, that he could not find it in his heart to leave.

When at last he got up from his chair and stepped closer to the side of the bed to bid good-night, John Allen lifted his hand slightly and let it fall again as if the effort was too much for him. Kirk leaned and took his twitching fingers in his hand. As he did so he felt the old man's hand close lingeringly in a weak grip that plainly expressed what he would have said had he been able to speak the words. A moment later Kirk turned away with a great heaviness at his heart.

At the door he came upon Jule and Ruth standing together in silence, their arms about each other, looking out into the night. Prompted by an impulse of the moment, Kirk paused before Jule and offered her his hand in parting. She responded with a light pressure of her fingers and Kirk turned away filled with a great tenderness for the girl who, he felt sure, would soon be alone in the world.

Tuck was already waiting for him when he got back to the cabin.

"Well, what's the word?" he asked.

"Phil has been over since you left," Tuck replied.

Kirk stopped suddenly and looked at Tuck. "You saw him?"

"Just as he was leaving."

"What did he want?"

"Didn't seem to want much of anything."

"Didn't you speak to him?"

"He was in his canoe before I caught sight of him."

Kirk smiled a little. "You've got to hand it to that boy for nerve," he said appreciatively. "Anything else doing?"

“They’re nearly all crowded into the bunkhouse up there,” Tuck replied. “There’s been trouble of some kind and a fight or two just to sweeten things a little.”

Kirk buttoned his coat about him, pulled his hat down on his head and went to the door. “I’m going to take a stroll up there and see what it’s all about. We’ve got to clean this up.”

Tuck followed him out and together the two took the way that led between the two rows of cabins in which the men were quartered. The doors of the cabins were open and Kirk noticed as they passed that all the houses were empty. As they approached the large bunkhouse at the upper end of the row they caught the sound of the men’s voices, half a dozen speaking at once in vain attempts to make themselves heard.

Just as they came to the doorway one voice, a little louder than the others, shouted, “To hell with the company!”

“Wait,” said Kirk, pausing a moment in the darkness outside and laying a hand on Tuck’s arm.

“To hell with Brander!” the same voice shouted and Kirk made a bound forward.

Hurling the door open he stopped on the doorstep and looked round at the men.

“Who says ‘To hell with Brander’?” he asked in a voice that broke so suddenly upon the men that they were struck silent.

A few feet away Kirk noticed one of the men he had paid off that very evening and had seen take the trail towards Paxton’s camp. He reached down and seized him by the collar.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. “I paid you off—get out of here!”

He lurched backwards through the doorway, dragging the fellow with him and almost threw him at Tuck.

“Here, Tuck,” he said, “boot this out of camp.”

Then he stepped back again and faced the men. “Who says, ‘To hell with Brander?’” he repeated looking down on the men in the dimly lighted interior of the cabin.

There was no immediate reply to his challenge and Kirk stepped down from the doorway, moved slowly along the narrow aisle between the bunks

where the men were sitting, and paused for a fraction of a second to look each man in the eye as he passed.

When he had gone the full length of the cabin he turned and let his eyes move over the whole crowd.

“Now, what’s it all about?” he asked. “If you’ve any real kick coming on the treatment you’re getting here let’s have it and get it over with.”

The discussion that ensued began slowly at first but before long it became apparent that the men were in two factions. When one man spoke there was someone of the opposing side ready to reply and in less than ten minutes Kirk had all he could do to control the situation so that one man might speak at a time and be heard. At the end of half an hour Kirk had learned all he wanted to know concerning the part Paxton had been taking in creating a feeling of discontent among the men. He brought the discussion suddenly to an end by offering to pay off any who were not satisfied with the work and the pay they were getting or could find better quarters or food anywhere else. When no one expressed any desire to accept his offer he told them that the work on the Micmac was going to go ahead in spite of the reports that Paxton’s hirelings had circulated to the contrary and that Paxton would be made to tell them a straight story before the night was over, if they would only wait where they were.

Kirk left the farther end of the aisle and came to Tuck where he stood leaning in the doorway. “Come on, Tuck,” he said. “We’re going to put a good big crimp in this game.”

He led the way down the hill towards the shore of the lake where the canoes were lying upside down near the water. They slipped a canoe into the water without speaking and pushed away from the shore. When a dozen vigorous strokes of the paddle had sent the canoe darting towards the camp on the other shore, Tuck ventured to ask Kirk what he was going to do.

“I’m going for Paxton,” he said, “and I’m going to bring the old geezer back dead or alive, or you can make arrangements for my funeral. He started this thing and he’s going to finish it, only I’m going to take a hand in telling him how to do it.”

Tuck laughed to himself and sent his paddle into the water with redoubled energy. A little less than ten minutes brought them to the other side of the bay and Kirk got quickly from his place in the bow of the canoe and ran up the narrow path leading into Paxton’s camp.

When he had gone a few yards he turned to Tuck who was hurrying to overtake him. "Stay in the canoe, Tuck, and be ready when I bring him down," he advised.

When Tuck protested, Kirk laughed. "Don't get worried," he chuckled. "I'm not going to start anything I can't finish. Just wait for me."

He turned and strode off towards the cabins that stood among the trees some distance from the shore. When he came to the first cabin he recognized it as one of the bunkhouses. Looking about him in the darkness he could see the lighted windows of the other cabins and for a moment he stood trying to work out for himself the ground plan of the camp. Only a few yards away stood three cabins apart from the others, two of them without any light, the third with a bright light in the window. Instinct prompted him to go and take a closer look at the cabin with the bright light. Something convinced him that Paxton was there.

Quietly he approached the window and glanced within. Seated at a table, his face turned towards the window through which Kirk was looking, Paxton sat, his mind evidently intent upon some papers he had spread out before him. Had he looked up at that moment he would have seen Kirk's face in the bright light from the lamp that stood on the table. Beside him, leaning over his shoulder was a thin, well-dressed man whom Kirk knew as the youth Paxton had brought in from Winnipeg to look after his office and stores. No one else was in the cabin.

In a moment Kirk was at the door. Lifting the latch quickly he threw the door open and jumping inside closed the door after him. With his back to the door he looked at Paxton who had leaped from his chair at the sudden interruption and was now on his feet, startled and white looking.

"What do you mean by this outrage?" Paxton asked in a voice that was anything but even.

"I want you, Warren Paxton," Kirk announced directly, "and I want you without anything rough. Put on your hat and coat and come with me."

"What's the game, young fellow?" he asked, struggling to regain control of his nerves.

"There's no game at all, except the one you're playing," Kirk replied, "and I'm going to make you play it through. Get into your hat and coat—you're going to visit my camp and talk to my men."

"Not if I know it!" Paxton retorted. "Now you get out!"

“Are you going to come or—”

“Get out!”

“You’re wasting time, Paxton,” Kirk reminded him.

For reply Paxton turned and leaned above the table, putting his hand out at the same time towards a leather holster that hung on a belt from a nail in the wall. With a leap Kirk was beside him. Seizing him round the neck, he drew his arm up so that Paxton’s throat was in the crook of his elbow. At the same moment he seized the clerk with his other hand.

“Not a word from either of you, now,” he warned.

He knew he had nothing to fear from the youthful clerk who had been practically helpless from the first shock of his sudden entrance. Had Paxton attempted to call for help a little tightening of the arm about his neck would have sufficed.

“Now we’ll go—but quietly, and nothing rough,” Kirk said in a low voice. “You don’t really need your coat—it’s warm and you won’t be long.”

He stooped and blew out the light and then the three moved awkwardly towards the door. When they had got outside Kirk paused a moment and peered about him in the darkness. There was no one in sight. He released his hold upon the two men.

“If either of you makes a false move or speaks,” he warned, “well—don’t do it! Come on.”

With his hands gripping the collars of the two men he faced them towards the lake and urged them forward. Tuck was waiting in the stern of the canoe when they came to the water’s edge. Silently Kirk directed Paxton to his place in the middle of the canoe and then spoke to the clerk.

“We’d take you along too if there was room,” he said, “Just wait here till we get away and then you can go on back.”

He put one foot into the canoe and pushed off with the other. As he settled himself and took his paddle, Paxton protested. “Do you think I’m going to submit to this?” he asked angrily.

Kirk paid no attention to the question. “If he makes a false move, Tuck,” he said without looking around, “chuck him over. We’ll swim for it. Now, dig in!”

“This is a damned outrage!” Paxton muttered, but Kirk and Tuck were fairly lifting the canoe out of the water.

They found the men waiting for them on the shore when they landed and Kirk lost no time in getting Paxton from the canoe and, with the men following close behind, hurrying him off to the large bunkhouse where only a few minutes before he had been in conference with the malcontents of his gang. Others of the camp hands had gathered during Kirk's absence so that when they had crowded through the doorway there was not a square foot of space left either in the bunks or in the aisle between.

Helpless to resist, Paxton accepted the inevitable and although his manner was anything but gracious he made no real attempt to retard the carrying out of the plans that Kirk had laid. Kirk led the way to the farther end of the cabin and getting up on a bench that stood close to the wall, reached down and helped Paxton to get up alongside him. Then he waited while the noise subsided.

"Here," Kirk said at last, "is the man who has been causing all the trouble in camp. I've brought him over to clear the air. Let's hurry it along—there'll be more to do in a little while when they've had time over there to hear about the kidnapping."

Kirk's questions followed one another in quick order and Paxton, anxious to get out of his embarrassing position as quickly as possible gave his replies with a directness and a despatch that surprised Kirk. He admitted his responsibility for the reports that had been going the rounds to the effect that Henry Tyne was practically insolvent and would be wrecked financially before another two months. Under pressure he even declared that Henry Tyne and he were competitors in a field where anything was regarded as fair that worked for the other's undoing, so long as it was not outside the law. Then his ill-temper got the better of him.

"But this kind of thing is outside the law," he stormed, turning to Kirk. "It is rank interference with a man's personal rights, and I'm going to make you pay for it. It's an outrage of the worst—"

But Kirk had heard all he wished to hear. "Let's get out," he said stepping down from the bench and pulling Paxton after him.

Paxton's protests suffered a rude interruption and Kirk hurried him through the crowd and out of the cabin. Outside he found Tuck Roberts waiting for him and beside him old man Dags who had just come up from one of the shafts where he had been at work since early evening.

"Let me give him another wettin', Kirk," he said as he saw the two emerge from the cabin.

Kirk hurried down the slope to the lake and in another minute they were on their way back again to Paxton's camp. That the clerk would have lost no time in spreading the news of what had happened, Kirk had no doubt. He knew, moreover, that Roche would probably act quickly. But Kirk had carried off the whole affair without a moment's interruption and Paxton had played his part with such little hesitation that Roche would have had barely enough time to get away before Kirk was on his way back. Just now excited voices came from the shore ahead, and the rattle of paddles being thrown into canoes. Kirk listened, without speaking, to the light scraping of a canoe on the ground and the soft swish as it took the water. Some of Paxton's men, Phil Roche among them probably, were on their way across the bay.

The prospect of a fight on the water with the darkness making success depend largely upon chance did not appeal to Kirk, particularly since Paxton's men were in all probability bringing three or four canoes. Had it been man for man he would have relished the experience for the sheer novelty of it. But with the odds so overwhelmingly against him he decided to curb somewhat the spirit of recklessness that had prompted his actions during the past couple of hours and proceed with more caution.

"More to the right, Tuck," he directed. "Give them room to pass. We don't want to mix it here."

Tuck sent the canoe off to the side out of line of the approaching canoes. For a minute or more they paddled very quietly and listened. There were at least three canoes. Gradually they became visible, three darker shadows emerging from the pale shadow of sky and water. The men were talking and plying their paddles busily. When they were abreast of the leading canoe, Kirk detected Phil Roche's voice. Paxton heard it at the same moment and cleared his throat as if preparing to call.

Kirk turned quickly. "You wouldn't be so foolish as that," he said very quietly. "The water's cold and besides—you'd never make it from here."

They stopped paddling until the three canoes were behind them on their left, then they put their paddles into the water again and headed directly for the landing. As they approached the shore they heard the voices of men at the edge of the water. With three canoes filled with men behind them and half Paxton's gang on the shore ahead of them, Kirk realized suddenly the disadvantage of his position. Paxton, apparently, was as alert to the change in advantage as he. With only a few yards to go he got upon his knees in the canoe and shouted.

"Hey, you! Phil! Help, here!"

Kirk lifted his paddle out of the water and swung it round threateningly but he was too late. Already the men on the shore had caught sight of the approaching canoe and recognized Paxton's voice. Immediately they set up a shouting that could have been heard to the farthest point on the lake. Kirk knew that in a few minutes the three canoes would be back again and escape would be impossible. To throw Paxton into the water and let him make shore as best he could would have been the most gratifying way out of the difficulty. They could then have put off in the darkness and trusted to their paddles. But Paxton's bulk and the unstability of a canoe made such a course practically impossible. Moreover, Paxton would put up a strenuous fight and make any such solution at least difficult. It was, above all, important that they should not lose the use of their canoe if they were to get safely out of the situation. Ahead of them, a crowd of miners made the problem of landing Paxton an extremely difficult one to solve with any hope of getting away again safely. And yet, it was the only course left open.

With a word to Tuck, Kirk reached out with his paddle and the canoe leaped forward. Paxton continued giving commands to the men on the shore, but Kirk gave them no heed. What he had to do now could be accomplished only by giving it his whole attention. Acting on suggestions from Paxton, a half dozen of his men came close to the water's edge to receive the canoe as it approached. Within a few feet of the shore Kirk spoke to Tuck.

"Drive her!"

He put all the strength he had into one stroke of his own paddle then jumping to his feet he swung his paddle about his head.

"Get back, get back, or I'll knock your brains out!" he cried and brought the heavy birch paddle round in front of him.

The men, taken by surprise, fell back in a half circle before Kirk's furious sweeps and kept at a safe distance while Tuck shoved the point of the canoe into the shore. Paxton's urging had little visible effect. Only one was reckless enough to attempt to get under the paddle and rush in. As he plunged towards the bow of the canoe, Kirk put his foot out and sent him sprawling upon the ground.

In the meantime Tuck had forced Paxton over the side of the canoe and with the use of his own paddle had sent him wading to the shore.

"All right," Tuck cried, and Kirk put the point of his paddle against the shore and pushed off. As they turned the canoe about in the water and headed it back towards the camp, Kirk and Tuck heard the voices of Phil Roche and his men coming back. They had had time to cross the bay and

come back again. They had probably gone all the way over before the summons shouted by Paxton and the men on shore reached them. From the sound of their voices Kirk judged that they had covered half the distance in return by the time he and Tuck had landed Paxton and were ready to put back.

Taking a course to the left they had paddled along parallel to the shore for a hundred yards or so in the hope that they might give Roche and his men the slip. But Paxton was watching their movements from the shore and although the water was dark, Kirk and Tuck were not far enough out to take full advantage of the cover the night afforded. Realizing what they were trying to do, Paxton began to shout new directions to Roche. Only a few minutes more, Kirk knew, and the three canoes would be closing in on them. The only possible escape lay in striking out boldly away from the shore until they should get beyond Paxton's sight. Once they were free from his interference they could trust to a chance opening and break through. If no such opening offered itself they could at least do their best to force Roche and his men to come at them one at a time.

A half dozen quick strokes brought them out of Paxton's sight. They knew that from the changed tone of Paxton's instructions. But almost at the same instant as they gained this advantage, Kirk, from his position in the bow of the canoe, saw the three dark shapes on the water directly ahead of him. They were spread out in a manner that made it practically impossible to get round one end of the line. Confident that they had not been observed as yet, they ceased paddling and watched the movements of the other canoes. They were coming down directly on top of them as if led by some instinct in the darkness.

"To the left," Kirk whispered, "and straight at 'em!"

A shout arose from the other canoes at the first dip of their paddles. They were discovered and would have to fight it out.

Following Kirk's directions precisely, Tuck kept the canoe pointed straight towards the dark shadow at the extreme left, glancing cautiously from time to time at the movements of the one in the centre and the one on the right. They had already gained some advantage as a result of their greater speed and the decisiveness with which they had moved. So long as they were able to force the fight the others would have to take their positions accordingly. Instead of falling back to give their companions an opportunity of coming around into position to assist, the canoe towards which they were hurrying moved farther away from the centre and widened the gap. For a

moment it appeared to Kirk as if the opening would become large enough to give them a chance to break through. But just as he thought of changing his tactics the centre canoe closed in suddenly and the voice of Phil Roche cursed the men in the other canoe and ordered them back.

But the men in the canoe on the left saw what neither Kirk nor Phil Roche for the moment saw. Behind them and only a few yards away another canoe was coming out of the darkness. Just as Roche swore a second time, Kirk saw the canoe with two men in it creeping up gradually into the gap. His first thought was that this was a fourth canoe with Paxton's men in it, but Roche's exclamation corrected that impression. Kirk's next guess was correct—old Dags was in the stern of the canoe with one of the camp hands in the bow.

“Go on—straight ahead!” Kirk cried to Tuck and the two canoes bore down upon the men on the left with Roche's canoe following some thirty or forty yards behind.

Realizing the difficulty of their position with a canoe attacking them on each flank and Roche's assistance too far off to be of any immediate value, the men in the canoe towards which Kirk was racing chose a course straight away from the others and began paddling furiously to escape the attack. But Kirk and Dags had gained their full speed before they had decided upon their course of action. Within a half dozen yards of the man in the stern of the canoe Kirk sent his paddle down for five or six quick strokes that brought him within reach. There was really no fight to it at all. At the first push from Kirk's paddle the men sprawled over the side of their canoe, their only thought being to extricate their legs as quickly as possible from beneath the thwarts of the canoe and take to the water with their limbs unhampered.

Kirk paused long enough to make sure that both men could swim and then turned to face Roche's canoe. Dags and his companion made the turn at the same moment and their canoes came close enough for them to distinguish each other quite clearly in the darkness. At the sight of the two canoes facing him and ready for action, Roche brought his own canoe to a standstill suddenly and waited for the canoe from behind to come up. The four canoes moved cautiously across the gap that separated them. Kirk and Dags moved apart slowly and their opponents followed their example. There was going to be nothing reckless in this fight. Foot by foot they crept closer, the man in the stern of each canoe doing all the paddling, the men in front waiting with their paddles ready.

Dags and his opponents engaged first, but Roche was so close now that Kirk gave the old fellow no attention. Behind Roche sat Joe Bedard whose wizardry as a canoeman Kirk and Tuck both knew only too well. Kirk and Roche knelt close to the bows with their paddle gripped in both hands and resting across the gunwales. The canoes were of the same size and matched well for shape. When the points of the canoes were not more than three feet apart, Roche reached forward and swung his paddle for Kirk's head. Kirk warded the blow with his own paddle and dropping the blade quickly, shot it forward towards the nose of Roche's canoe. At the same moment Tuck gave his paddle a vigorous dip and Kirk braced himself for the shove. But Roche's paddle swung back and down and Kirk's blow glanced along the side of the canoe. The action had sent both canoes several feet apart and when Kirk and Roche had recovered themselves sufficiently to make another attempt the craft lay side by side so far away from each other that for the next few moments the fight was between Tuck and Joe Bedard for position.

Once again they came together cautiously and with an air of determination to end the fight. This time the points slipped past each other so closely that the sides of the two canoes rubbed. Tuck and Bedard put all the power of their arms and shoulders into keeping the two canoes together while Kirk and Roche rose up in their places. The first exchanges of blows with the paddles were parried and realizing that they were too close now to use their paddles, the two men lurched over the sides of the canoes, seized each other and clung together in a fierce struggle to drag each other into the water.

With footing so uncertain the fight could not continue for any great length of time. It might have gone on for minutes, however, for the men were locked so firmly in each other's arms that the canoes were bound together as if they had been roped. But Tuck reached wide and drew his paddle straight towards him from the side. The bow swung out and drove the sharp nose into the side of the other canoe. Flipping his paddle quickly to the other side he drove the canoe forward with all his strength. The effect was not great nor was it immediate, but it was sufficient. Realizing what Tuck was doing Kirk struggled to free himself from Roche's grip. Then lurching forward suddenly he threw his whole weight high up against Roche's shoulders. The hold was broken, the balance lost and Roche, his hands sprawling before him went over with the canoe into the water. Tuck gave his paddle a few backward strokes and withdrew out of reach of the plunging figures in the water.

Lying back in the darkness was the canoe with Dags and his companion. A row-boat was already in sight coming to the rescue of Paxton's men.

"Let's go," said Kirk, and the two canoes shot away in the darkness together leaving Roche and his companions clinging to their canoes.

For the next few minutes while they paddled to camp they reviewed the events of the evening and laughed heartily over the outcome.

Standing on the shore Ruth Mackay awaited their return and Kirk felt his heart sink as he realized the meaning of her late visit to the camp. When the canoe had touched the shore he looked up at her without moving and waited for her to speak.

"John Allen is dead," she announced simply.

And Kirk who had never known his own father felt something of the pangs of grief he might have felt had he been the son of old John Allen.

CHAPTER XIX.

Jule Allen stood in the doorway of her cabin and looked out at the early morning. It was August and the fresh green of the out-of-doors shone in the full glory of sunlight. She loved those summer mornings. They were hers. Sometimes Ruth Mackay came to stay the night with her and then they went together to bathe in the creek in a little hidden place below the falls and romped until noon in the woods or dreamed lazily on the rocks beside the creek. But her mornings were seldom shared even with Ruth, and no one else ever came to the cabin so early in the day.

She was up even earlier than usual this morning. Some stirring in her veins made her long to be out, to be abroad in her world and to drink in the glory of it. With a word to the Indian woman who had been her sole companion in the cabin since the death of old John Allen, she left the cabin and calling Snap to her, raced off along the path to the top of the rock. Face downwards she lay in the full flood of the sunlight and gazed long at the swirling water breaking against the rocks below. A little pathway dropped down from above by slow degrees to the level of the water beneath the falls and ran into the hidden corner that held the little eddying pool in which she took her morning plunge. Back a little way from the rock's head, quiet under the soft shadows of the trees that leaned above it was the sacred spot where they had laid her father. Above it, like a great dark sentinel above the falls, stood a lobstick that had been trimmed by John Mackay to mark the place. Jule had grown to look upon the spot now without much sadness. It made her wistful sometimes when she thought of the hopes that lay buried there. But she thought with pride of her father's faith in her.

One thing only disturbed her as she lay and looked at the water tumbling beneath her. Ever since those dark days in June when her father had lingered and gone, Phil Roche had been a frequent visitor in the evenings. Often he had come when Ruth was there, and sometimes Joe Bedard came too. Often, too, whether by design or accident she never knew, Bedard and Ruth went off together and she found herself alone with Phil Roche. She didn't like the idea of Ruth's being thrown into the company of Joe Bedard. Once she mentioned it but Ruth's black eyes deepened and Jule was reminded again of the mixed blood that flowed in her veins. Her feeling for Phil Roche, however, caused her much uneasiness. Was she foolish to close her heart to

the appeals of a man who, after all, had much that the youth in her admired? He was strong, he was clean and he had acted fairly. Not once had he referred to the affair of the previous summer, or showed any hint of his dislike for what she had done. And yet, something was wanting, something too subtle for her power of analysis to discern. Sometimes she had felt that something when she saw Kirk Brander going about among his men at the Micmac. But he was of the outside, he was for Marion Curtis and the difficult ways of that other world that she did not know.

Slowly she crawled forward and allowed her body to slip over the edge of the rock. Laughing at Snap who stood whining above her she let herself down to a lower ledge. When Snap turned and raced up the shore to where the pathway started down towards the pool, she scrambled quickly from one narrow ledge to another down the face of the rock in a mad race to reach the bottom ahead of Snap. Her pulse bounded with excitement as she heard the dog's bark and she became almost reckless in her haste. Four feet from the pathway that skirted the water's edge she leaped down just as Snap broke round a jutting ledge of rock and the two raced along together to the pool.

Five minutes later she plunged into the eddy and struggled gloriously against the swirling current. On the rock from which she had taken her plunge, Snap lay stretched out, his front paws almost touching the water. Fifteen minutes of plunging and laughing and she was out again on the rock beside Snap, shaking her hair free in the morning air.

When she reached the upper end of the pathway on her way back to the cabin she stopped suddenly. Standing in the doorway of the cabin was Kirk Brander, waiting, evidently, for her return. She gathered her hair together in her two hands and shook it free again in the warm sunlight. Then walking slowly towards the cabin she twisted her hair slowly into a knot at the back of her neck where she held it with one hand as she came to the doorway.

There was something shy, almost self-conscious in her manner that Kirk could not help detect at once. He looked at her and smiled.

"I like it better the way it was," he said glancing at her hair.

There was no suggestion of familiarity in his voice or manner. He was simply expressing an opinion, quietly and almost without knowing what he did, and Jule was far from feeling any displeasure at his words. A mischievous impulse seized her suddenly and she took her hand from the knot and let her hair fall in a riotous shower about her shoulders. At the same moment her self-consciousness vanished and she laughed as she stood

before him and looked up at his bronzed face and his quiet eyes grown suddenly serious.

“I thought you were much too busy to visit your neighbors,” she said without realizing the full significance of her words.

“During the day—yes,” Kirk replied. “In the evenings when I have time, my neighbors haven’t any.”

She knew he had Phil Roche in mind as he spoke and wondered vaguely whether he was serious or bantering. When she looked at him, however, his face was very serious. She felt herself prompted to make a mischievous reply.

“You prefer to do your fighting on water rather than on land,” she suggested.

Kirk’s face brightened and he laughed in spite of himself.

“I don’t mind the fighting,” he admitted. “I rather like it, in fact, but I like to think there’s some chance of winning.”

She walked past him and went into the cabin and Kirk followed her in. He sat down on a small bench beside the door while Jule sat in to the table where her breakfast awaited her.

“I’m going to eat my breakfast,” she said, “I’m as hungry as a wolf.”

“Go ahead,” Kirk replied. “I have only a minute to stay anyhow. I had a letter from my uncle in last night’s mail and he and Marion Curtis are coming to the Micmac for a few days. I really came over to find out if you could put her up here for her stay. We can look after Henry Tyne all right but we have no accommodation for a lady.”

Jule called to her Indian woman and told her the news. The only response was a smile that spread over her face and a grunted, “Huh!”

“Tell her we’ll be pleased to have her come and stay with us as long as she wishes to,” Jule said by way of interpreting her housekeeper’s response.

“That’ll be fine,” Kirk replied getting up and moving to go. “We’ll make your losses good—pay you for broken dishes and so on.”

Jule smiled. “This will be my chance to replace some cracked cups and a chipped saucer or two that I have had for weeks,” she said.

“Your list will be checked over very carefully,” he reminded her as he stepped to the doorway. “But I must be getting back.”

“Perhaps we’ll see you occasionally when our city visitor comes,” Jule remarked pointedly, getting up and going to the door.

There was something in Kirk Brander that almost angered her. Even when he was joking he seemed casual and disinterested. When he spoke of his work it was as if he had no other care in the world. Instinctively she knew that she could not be casual in her regard for him and it vexed her.

“The city visitor will not be permitted to interfere with my work any more than my—my country neighbors,” he retorted.

“It must be wonderful to have work of that kind,” she smiled.

Jule knew that she was acting the part of a young coquette and yet it pleased her more than anything that had ever occurred between her and this strange mixture of seriousness and good humor that she had come to know as Kirk Brander. But if coquetry was pleasing to her it seemed out of place to Kirk. He paid no heed to the little thrust in her last remark. The smile passed from his countenance and he turned to face her squarely.

“Jule Allen,” he said slowly and in a voice from which all the pleasantries had gone, “I’d like to come here sometime. I’d like to see you and talk to you. It isn’t my work that keeps me away. And it isn’t our—our city visitor. And it isn’t Phil Roche.”

She stood in the doorway looking at him and waiting. Though he paused she did not speak. She felt sure she knew what was in his mind, had been in his mind, in fact, ever since the day they had met on the hillside.

“And I’m not stubborn,” he put in suddenly as if he had forgotten to include it in his last speech.

“I half believe you are,” Jule replied. She succeeded in playing the part she had set out to play but in her heart a vague feeling of resentment was rising.

Kirk looked from her to the dog that lay a few feet away in the shade of the cabin wall. “I had a friend once, Jule Allen,” he said boldly, “the first real friend I ever had in this country—and the best friend I ever had anywhere. That dog was his dog,” he said, pointing to Snap. “Some day, when I have found out where you got him, I’ll tell you what happened to my friend. I know you don’t know anything about it. Once I asked you a question about that dog. Perhaps I shouldn’t have asked it. I’m not quite sure even yet. But you refused to answer. Well—I’m going to find out if it takes five years.”

Jule's eyes had lost all their witchery. In its place were the dark fires mingled of pride and anger.

"And you'll never find it out from me—never!" she retorted angrily.

"Just now I can't feel easy coming over here," Kirk continued. "When I've got that all cleared up, Jule Allen—"

She interrupted him quickly. "I'll ask you to stay away."

"I'll come anyhow," Kirk replied and his good-humored smile was returning.

"Then I'll order you off the property."

Kirk's laugh placed her at a most uncomfortable disadvantage. "Then I'll buy the property," he boasted.

"You'll not!" she flashed, and turned back into the cabin.

"Well," Kirk commented, "we certainly seem to hit it off well together whenever we do meet."

But the door of the cabin closed on his words and he was left alone. For a moment he stood smiling to himself and then turned back towards the camp.

When she was quite sure that Kirk had left, Jule opened the door of her cabin again and let the sunshine stream in. Before going back to the table she stepped outside and glanced furtively in the direction of the trail leading to the Micmac. There was no sign of Kirk as far as she could see. When she turned back again into the cabin she felt like laughing to herself.

She probably would have done so had not a sharp bark from Snap warned her that someone was coming. Half expecting that Kirk Brander had returned she checked her desire to laugh and assumed as best she could an air of haughty indifference as she went to the door. Coming down the trail from a little way up the creek were Warren Paxton and Phil Roche. Somehow she resented their coming just then. Paxton she heartily disliked. As for Phil Roche—she just didn't want to see him. She turned from the doorway and going back again into the cabin, sat down at the table. She had all the appearance of being very much preoccupied when the shadows of the two men darkened the doorway.

She looked up and received Paxton's smile.

"I hope we are not interrupting—so early in the day," he apologized.

Phil Roche remained in the background and allowed Paxton to enter as he spoke. Jule got up and stood beside her chair.

“I’ve just finished my breakfast,” she exclaimed. “But it’s all right. You aren’t the first caller I’ve had this morning.”

“So?” Paxton raised his eyebrows questioningly. “We thought we would have the honor of being first on the ground. But sit down, Miss Allen, and go on with your breakfast. Our call is very informal—purely business—and needn’t disturb you in the least.”

Jule resumed her seat and continued eating. Paxton chose the small bench on which Kirk had been sitting only a few minutes before, and sat down with his hat in his hand. Phil Roche stood a moment in the doorway and then, entering slowly, sauntered to a seat near Paxton.

“You won’t mind if I talk business while you eat your breakfast, Miss Allen?” Paxton began.

“Not at all,” Jule replied rather shortly. There was something so unpleasant in the prospect of hearing Paxton talk business that she could not help her abrupt manner. She had heard him talk business before, had seen him sit in much the same attitude before her father, and had seen her father’s face grow hard as he listened to Paxton’s talk.

“I have just had word that Henry Tyne is on his way here—will arrive in the next day or so, in fact,” Paxton informed her. “I’ve come over to strike a little bargain with you. Marion Curtis will be with him and together they are going to make another bid for your claims here. I don’t think there’s any doubt of that. I happen to know pretty well the position Henry Tyne and his associates are facing at the present time. The Micmac isn’t showing up as they hoped it would. Henry Tyne is going to stake everything on this one throw—he won’t live long enough to play another game of this size. If he gets hold of the White Squaw claims it will help. He’s bringing a couple of men with him to make an exhaustive, perhaps a final, report on the showings in the Micmac. We happen to know pretty well now what they will report. The last month has shown pretty well where the high grade stuff is going to be found.”

Jule moved a little impatiently. “Perhaps if you would just tell me—” she began.

“Certainly,” Paxton submitted apologetically. “Well, this is my proposition. Tyne and I are in this field because we hope to make money out of it. It’s a business proposition, Miss Allen, and competition is pretty keen

these days. He wants this property—so do I. He can't make a bid that I'm not prepared to match. But he may come to you with inducements that I don't know anything about. Contrary to my intentions or wishes in the matter, your father and I had differences. That was unfortunate and I have always regretted it. I regret even more that you should have fallen heir to his resentment for I assure you I harbor nothing of the kind. Now, then—I have had certain plans in mind for developing water power on the creek. I did not realize at the time that you had a—a kind of sentiment for the falls that made my plans extremely objectionable to you. Here's my proposition, Miss Allen. I realize you will not talk business to me concerning the White Squaw claims. All right. I come now, not to ask anything. I want to make you an offer. I shall respect your sentiment for the falls in the creek. It may be a little hard to understand but I don't ask you to understand it. I simply respect it. Out of consideration for that sentiment I will leave the falls just as they are as long as you refuse to sell to Henry Tyne. Now, I've gone a long way round to give you my offer. But you have it. It's simple enough, surely. What is your answer?"

Jule had finished her breakfast while Paxton was speaking. When he ceased she got up from the table and walked thoughtfully to the open doorway and stood in the sunshine. She made a beautiful picture there with her hair loose about her shoulders and the sun flooding it with gold. Paxton waited for her to answer his question.

When she finally spoke she continued to look out-of-doors, but her words came slowly and very deliberately. "When I refuse to sell the White Squaw, Mr. Paxton," she said, "it will not be because you have it in your power to take away the beauty from the place that has been mine for the best part of my life. The first man who lays a hand on that—I believe I'd kill him. If I sell the White Squaw it will be because I want to and I'll choose my own buyer. I shall not sell to you—and I shall not sell to Henry Tyne. That much I know now. And I shall not change my mind."

"You are your father's daughter," Paxton remarked, getting up from his seat and preparing to leave. "For the present, at any rate, I can accept that understanding. It is quite agreeable to me."

Jule stepped out in order to allow Paxton to pass. Phil Roche followed immediately and the two men paused for a moment near the door.

"I have to go on down and leave a message for John Mackay," Paxton said to Roche. "You can go on back if you like, or wait here until I come back."

He bowed to Jule and went off along the pathway into the woods, leaving Roche alone with Jule. They exchanged no word until Paxton was out of sight and hearing. Then Roche turned from looking after Paxton and faced Jule suddenly.

“Brander was here this morning,” he said abruptly.

Jule saw from the expression on his face that he was having a struggle to control himself. Her talk with Paxton had left her in a very serious mood.

“What of it?” she challenged.

Roche looked at her for some time before he spoke.

“I’m goin’ to be serious with you, Jule Allen,” he said at last.

Jule turned away impatiently and walked away towards the rock above the falls. Roche watched her from before the cabin, his anger rising as the distance between them grew. He watched Snap get up from his place near the doorway and trot off to join her. Then with a muttered ejaculation he followed and came behind her where she stood looking from the top of the rock towards the lake shining in the distance.

“You’re goin’ to listen to me,” he said suddenly. “You think I care for these things—Paxton and the rest of them? I’m here because you’re here—because I want to take you away with me. I’ve waited—an’ I can wait—but I’ve got to know you’re goin’ to come.”

There was a note of pleading in his voice that almost touched Jule’s heart. She turned to him quietly.

“But I have told you,” she reminded him, “and you know. I can’t help it if—if I don’t feel as you want me to.”

“But I could make you feel— —” he began to protest.

“No one could do that,” she replied.

Roche’s manner changed instantly. “No?” he retorted. “We’ll see. You got away last summer because I let you go. You won’t do that again. I’m goin’ to stay here until we go away together. An’ I’m goin’ to teach you to feel the way I want you to feel—teach you before someone else starts.”

She moved back from him. “You can’t teach me that, Phil Roche,” she said defiantly, “and you know it.”

When he took a step towards her she spoke a word to the dog and seizing him by the collar pulled him towards her and crouched behind him.

The dog showed his teeth and Roche paused.

“Come another step,” she threatened, “and I’ll let him loose.”

Roche’s smile was cynical. He stooped a little and put out his hand speaking gently to the dog as he did so. Snap’s ears dropped suddenly and his snarl vanished. Roche took another step towards them.

“Snap!” Jule cried.

At once the dog’s teeth bared in a white snarl. Again Roche stopped suddenly.

“Lie down, you fool!” he commanded and the dog turned its face towards Jule, licking his jaws uneasily and whining.

For the next few minutes Jule and Roche battled to control the dog’s mood and then, without warning, Roche stepped suddenly close and hurled the dog to one side. Jule sprang back from him and stood close to the edge of the rock.

“Come away from there,” Roche ordered.

But Jule, white with anger, faced him. “Phil Roche,” she said, “go away from here. Go away! I’m not afraid of you. I thought you were a man—I hoped you had something in you that was straight. But I know—I know now.” She pointed at Snap who was standing at Roche’s legs. “You gave me that dog because you couldn’t keep him. You stole him—I wouldn’t believe it, but I know it.”

Roche grinned and looked at her darkly. “So Brander’s been talkin’,” he said. “Well, we’ll fix that.”

He seized the dog by the collar and lifting him from the ground stepped towards the edge of the rock. Jule’s scream awoke the savage instincts in the dog. With a sudden gathering up of his shaggy body and a twisting of his powerful neck he freed himself from the grip that held him and his jaws closed upon Roche’s wrist in a vicious snap. With an oath Roche leaped back and the dog dropped to the ground, his angry fangs bared and his hair bristling.

Jule stepped close to the dog and crouched again behind him, her two hands gripping his collar.

“Go away from here,” she commanded. “You can’t frighten us. Go away, or I’ll let him loose!”

Roche looked at his wounded wrist and laid a hand over it. "Sure, I'll go," he said. "I'll go—but I'm comin' back, and when I do the dog won't count."

He turned away slowly and took the pathway leading along the creek to where the canoe was waiting close to the water.

CHAPTER XX.

At noon the next day Henry Tyne and Marion Curtis arrived. Kirk's first glimpse of his uncle was from the window of the sampling room where, with Tuck Roberts, he was crushing samples from a new body of ore they had drifted into during the week. Henry Tyne, accompanied by the two engineers he had brought in with him, was emerging from the woods along the trail from Ripple Creek. Kirk looked at the approaching figures absently a moment, so engrossed was he in the sampling of the new ore, and then suddenly awakening, he dropped the two pans holding the sample he had just divided and ran to the door. From the open doorway he looked down the slope towards the three approaching figures.

"Here they are, Tuck!" he cried and rushing out, hurried away to meet his uncle.

Henry Tyne did not appear to recognize Kirk until they had come within a few yards of each other. Then suddenly the old man's face lighted up and he almost ran towards Kirk with both hands outstretched.

"Oh, you husky young devil!" Henry Tyne panted under the vigorous reception his prodigal ward was giving him.

But Kirk could say nothing in reply. After the first words of greeting, he held his uncle's hands in his and looked at him without speaking. If five years in the open had meant the storing up of strength and energy in his young frame, they had brought Henry Tyne so close to the end of his physical resources that Kirk scarcely recognized his uncle in the man that stood before him.

"What have they done to you?" Kirk's heart framed the question a half dozen times as he stood looking at his uncle but he hesitated to put it into words. He heard his uncle's voice introducing the two men who had come to look over the mine, but he remembered later that the men's voices, even the grip of their hands, had not been sufficient to bring him to himself. He could think only of the old man whose arm he held as they walked together to the camp and of that other man, the man who had sat across from him at the breakfast table five years before.

"Poor old Unk!" he said aloud as they walked slowly up the hill.

Henry Tyne smiled a little. "I guess they've mussed me up a bit since you saw me last," he commented.

"If I'd known," Kirk replied, "I'd have gone back to you long ago. I'd never have left."

"You'd have left, all right, you young hothead," Henry Tyne protested. "And you'd better leave out this eleventh hour seeking forgiveness. It doesn't suit you. Besides, anything that would make a man of you is—is worth it. You look like a young giant, Kirk, and God knows you hadn't much to go on. Have you developed any sense with all your muscle."

Kirk laughed. "Too much ever to take an old man at his word again," he retorted. "Next time you tell me to get out—I'll stick!"

"You thought you were putting one over on the old man, didn't you?" Henry Tyne chuckled. "Well, I hope you've paid for it, you young profligate."

"I have, Unk," Kirk confessed and they entered Kirk's cabin together.

They found Dags in the cabin drying his hands in a towel as they entered. "This is Dags, Unk," Kirk continued, "my self-appointed guardian."

The two men shook hands cordially. "Heard of you from Marion Curtis," Henry Tyne said. "I've come up to give you a hand with this young scrub nephew of mine."

"I wish you'd take the job off my hands," Dags returned.

"Settle that after you've had something to eat," Kirk interrupted. "There goes the gong."

"How's everything in the shafts to-day, Dags?" Kirk asked as they made their way to the cook-house a few minutes later.

Dags did not reply at once. Kirk glanced at him and caught the half troubled, half-amused expression in his face.

"Not so good, eh?"

"Six men stayed in their bunks this morning," Dags announced. "What did turn out would 'a' been better if they'd stayed in bed. When a man's drunk he can't do anything, but when he's got a hang-over he's no good an' he's ugly besides."

"That's the third time in three weeks," Kirk commented.

“An’ it’s goin’ to happen again,” Dags declared, “unless we get the man that’s dishin’ the stuff out. It sure has some poke to it. For homebrew it’s got anything beat I ever saw. They don’t get back into shape for three days. Some o’ them haven’t been real sober for two weeks.”

“And you haven’t got a line on who’s bringing it in?”

“Just who don’t matter much,” Dags replied. “It’s bein’ made across the lake an’ peddled in. We’re goin’ to have some time gettin’ it.”

For an hour or more Kirk and Henry Tyne sat at the table in the cook-house, eating leisurely and giving each other hurried accounts of what had happened during the five years of their separation. When they left the table they went together to Kirk’s cabin and sat down for a half hour of leisure over their pipes. Marion Curtis had stayed at Jule Allen’s cabin and although Kirk was anxious to see her, he wished to hear first of all from his uncle’s own lips something of the condition of their affairs. When Dags had taken the two engineers away with him to visit one of the shafts in which work was going on, Kirk settled into a chair opposite Henry Tyne and prepared to ask the question that was uppermost in his mind at the moment. But his uncle anticipated him.

“You’re wondering just where we stand,” he said, half musing as he looked at Kirk and drew slowly at his pipe.

“Perhaps you’d better not talk much about that, Unk, until you’ve had a little while to rest,” Kirk suggested. “The trip in must have tired you.”

Henry Tyne cleared his voice a little nervously. “It did tire me, Kirk,” he admitted, “but not so much as that. You’ve got to know all there is to know, and I want you to hear it from me. Marion will tell you but there are a few things we might just as well face together.”

Kirk had had an uneasy presentiment for some weeks, a feeling that everything was not well with Henry Tyne. Now, in the tone of his uncle’s voice, in the expression of his face, and in the words themselves there was a meaning that made his heart sink.

“You’ve done good work here, Kirk,” Henry Tyne went on, “good work—and work that deserves to be rewarded with success. But the truth is, the thing is too big for me, it has got beyond me. I’ve got together just about everything I can, and it isn’t enough. It would have been all right if I’d had the fight in me that I once had. But that’s gone, Kirk, and I may as well admit it to you. Paxton and his gang have closed every door. I’ve banked with old man Wilton, for example, for years. He stood behind me when I

hadn't a cent of my own. But we talked together the other day. Wilton's getting on in years. He may be retired any day. And Wilton wants to retire with a clean record. He would advance money on good securities but—well, a copper mine that's all under the ground isn't exactly a safe security for a bank manager to work on.”

Henry Tyne paused a minute and puffed slowly at his pipe.

“And that isn't the only thing, Kirk,” he continued. “Paxton's gang have bought up that ridge at the divide. We must have a railway here if we're going to develop the property at a profit. We can't lug all this stuff out by barge, handle it four or five times and then ship it out to make it pay. The company was ready to begin their survey just as soon as we closed the deal. But they're not going to pay by the square foot for a right-of-way. And Paxton has that staked off in gold claims. The fact is, Paxton has been out for my scalp ever since I cleaned him out in Consolidated Pulp four years ago. He was beaten then and he's been waiting ever since for a chance to even up the score. I'm not squealing—it's in the game. He couldn't get back at me while I was going strong. He's willing to wait till I'm old and the fight's gone out of me. He's got the idea I'm about ripe enough to drop now anytime and he's making a big stroke.”

“Paxton can't put you out!” Kirk interrupted suddenly.

Henry Tyne smiled a little. “Paxton has timed everything pretty well, Kirk,” he replied. “He knows I'm done. I'm up here now to play my last card—and he knows that, too.”

“Has Marion Curtis given up, too?” Kirk asked.

He could not associate any idea of defeat with Marion Curtis. On the other hand, however, he had never thought of Henry Tyne admitting defeat.

“Marion Curtis doesn't tell all she knows,” the old man replied. “I believe she has some plans of her own that she wants to try as a last resort. I've come in to see Paxton. If we can meet on some kind of a fair deal, we'll withdraw and leave him on the ground. If not—it'll be for Marion to fight it out with Paxton. I'll look on.”

“I'll not look on—I'll fight!” Kirk protested.

“I'd like you the better for that, Kirk, if there was any way out of it, or any hope of winning in the end. What I'd rather see you do would be to leave this God-forsaken place, a thousand miles from nowhere, and come out with us. We'll be able to start you at something where you can live like a human being in a civilized community that'll offer a young man a future.”

Some hidden resentment sprang unbidden to the surface as Kirk heard his uncle's description of the country as "God-forsaken." He glanced through the open doorway at the smooth surface of the lake, rimmed with jagged spruce and dotted with islands, and above, the clear blue of the afternoon sky flecked with bits of white cloud. Henry Tyne had spoken slander. Kirk forced back the words that came suddenly to mind. He got up from his chair a little impatiently and tapped his pipe lightly on the edge of the stove.

"There's no accounting for tastes, Unk," he said casually. "Let me take you down and show you over the works."

They spent the afternoon leisurely going over the property, inspecting the work itself, visiting for a few minutes in the deepest shaft where the water trickled down the walls faintly visible in the light from the little carbide lamps they carried. Henry Tyne stood behind the men at their work and listened to the roar of the drill working its way into the solid rock until he felt the chill of the place reaching him through the heavy rubber coat Kirk had belted about him before they entered the shaft. Later they walked slowly over the property itself, skirted the lake in one direction and noted the outcroppings of ore, clambered up the hill and rested here and there in the shade while they talked more often about matters of purely personal concern than about the enterprise upon which Henry Tyne's last hopes hung.

But for both of them that afternoon, the business of tearing the wealth out of the secret corners of the earth was as nothing compared to the glory of reunion. And that glory for Kirk Brander was touched with deep pity for the worn man who had been his ideal of strength in his younger days; while the glory for Henry Tyne was heightened with pride for the man that Kirk Brander had become.

Late that evening Kirk sat beside Marion Curtis on the high rock above the falls. They had left Henry Tyne with Jule Allen and had gone there while it was still light to talk together over what had occurred since their last meeting. Marion had told him the whole story of Henry Tyne's struggles against odds that daily had become greater until they had been forced, practically to accept defeat. Kirk had told everything of interest that had happened during the summer months and they had finally lapsed into a long silence.

"But I can't think we're done," Kirk protested, seeking almost despairingly for some ray of hope from Marion Curtis.

"We're not done—no," she replied. "But we can exhaust every remaining possibility by to-morrow night. We must talk to Paxton. Your uncle and you will have to do that. Our friend Warren wouldn't see me for a minute. There's just a possibility of his being willing to meet us half way in a deal to consolidate the two properties. Failing that we can seek an extension of the option with John Mackay."

"He's been away on another cruise," Kirk interrupted.

"But he's expected back soon, according to Jule. If John Mackay proves stubborn there's not much more to it."

"But there's money in the country—it isn't all behind doors that Warren Paxton has locked."

"There is money, yes, and investors looking for opportunities; but we can't raise capital on the reports we have had to date from the Micmac. We've done our best but the prospect isn't rich enough."

"I believe two more weeks would have done it," Kirk said impatiently. "That new body of ore is starting in just like the old Lucky Strike."

"Get John Mackay to extend the option another six weeks and there may be a way out," Marion Curtis observed.

For a moment there was silence again as they sat and thought of the problem they were facing.

"How about the White Squaw?" Kirk asked. "It should be good for a few thousand."

"In the first place we'd have to have a few thousand to buy it, and even if we had we couldn't get it."

"She wouldn't sell to me but—has Jule Allen refused to sell to you?"

"Not exactly," Marion Curtis replied evasively.

"Not exactly? What, then?"

"Jule Allen has sold the White Squaw," she announced.

Kirk sat up suddenly and looked at her. "Sold the White Squaw?" he exclaimed.

"It was a secret, but I thought you ought to know. Sooner or later everyone will know about it anyhow. And don't get any foolish ideas in your head, either—I didn't buy it."

"Not Paxton?"

"I'd like to know. I tried to find out but—Miss Jule keeps her secrets very well."

Kirk put his head in his hands. "Jove, this is going to be hard to take," he said regretfully. "It'll just about do for Unk. And it's going to take all I've got in me to stand by and see him take it. By gad, I won't do it either! Something's got to break!"

"Kirk Brander," said Marion Curtis pensively, "you'll never know what this is costing me. I'm not afraid of being beaten. I have been beaten before. But sometimes we have dreams that mean as much to us as life itself. I'm going to tell you now what you will know sooner or later anyhow. I dreamed of putting this thing over in a big way partly for the satisfaction of beating a man who has been out to beat me ever since I have known him; partly, too, for Henry Tyne, one of the very few men I have known who play the business game clean and above the table all the time. But most of all I wanted the satisfaction of doing something really big—in a big way—to prove to myself that I still had the power I once had—"

She hesitated and looked down at the water rushing over the rocks in the rapids. Kirk waited, not knowing whether to speak or remain silent.

"Oh, don't you see?" she broke out finally. "I have not come here for this—success is nothing—money doesn't mean anything. What does a woman want with all this—this scrambling after dollars? There's only one failure in the life of any woman—only one defeat—and I—I can't—bah!"

She ceased speaking suddenly and got to her feet. For a moment she stood looking at the rapids, her hands clasped tightly before her. Then turning abruptly, she started down the path.

"Let's go in," she said.

Kirk got up and followed her down the path to the door of the cabin without speaking. When they opened the door and entered the cabin they found Henry Tyne and Jule Allen sitting close to each other by the table. Before them, lying open on the table, was a large catalogue with pictures of a score of varieties of perennial blooms. As Jule looked up the light from the lamp fell full upon her face and Kirk saw there an expression that he had not seen since the days when she used to sit beside her father.

"I'm choosing my next year's flowers," she said cheerfully as Marion Curtis came to her and looked over her shoulder.

"By Jove, she's going to make a gardener out of me," Henry Tyne laughed.

Then the girl and the old man laughed together as heartily as if they had known each other for years.

When Henry Tyne and Kirk left the cabin a few minutes later, Jule Allen went to the door and stepped outside to bid them good-night. Kirk paused a moment while his uncle went on.

“Your secret is out, Jule Allen,” Kirk accosted her suddenly. “The White Squaw—”

“It was no secret,” she protested. “You might have known a week ago if you had asked me.”

Kirk smiled at her pretty deception. “There’s one consolation—you can’t order me off the property, anyhow.”

“I still have my rights as tenant,” she countered.

Kirk turned away. “Look out,” he warned. “I’m going to turn outlaw one of these days! Coming, Unk!”

He hurried off to join Henry Tyne awaiting him where the trail turned into the woods.

CHAPTER XXI.

Early the next morning Warren K. Paxton sat in the little cabin that did service as an office in his camp. Paxton was in good spirits—better spirits than usual. The world without was steeped in August sunshine but even if the skies had been gray, Paxton's optimistic mood would have been sufficient to spread the place with good cheer. When a man sees his fondest dreams being realized before his very eyes he has cause to be happy. The arrival of Henry Tyne the day before was the first scene in the closing act of the drama in which he was playing an important role. In three weeks or less the curtain would go down on Henry Tyne and his business associates and Warren K. Paxton could write the moral to the story.

The fact that John Mackay had been absent for several days, with no word of his whereabouts and no certainty as to when he should return, gave Paxton cause for further satisfaction. Every day that passed now was a day lost to Henry Tyne. The last day of August would bring Tyne's option on the Micmac to an end, and with less than three weeks to go, Paxton could wait. He was ready to act when the day and the hour arrived.

"If we could only keep John Mackay out of the way for a few days longer," he thought to himself, "it would help to wear Henry down. Poor old Henry never was much good at waiting. That was his chief fault."

His mind took a sudden turn in another direction. Coming up the pathway from the creek was Jule Allen, walking alone and with very resolute step. Almost unconsciously he brushed his clothes quickly with his hand, straightened his vest and the collar of his coat and became very busy with the papers that lay on his table. He did not look up again until the girl's shadow darkened the doorway.

He greeted her with his thin smile and Jule came towards the table.

"Can I see you alone for a few minutes, Mr. Paxton?" she asked and her manner was very direct and impersonal.

"Sit down," he replied going for a chair and placing it near his table. "We'll not be disturbed here."

"I have come to talk business with you, Mr. Paxton," Jule proceeded. "It's about the water power and—Mr. Tyne."

Paxton placed the fingers of his two hands together very thoughtfully and looked at her with searching eyes. He did not know whether to be suspicious or not.

“Yes?” he prompted when she paused a moment.

Jule looked up at him, her eyes gazing straight into his. “One man already has been broken and laid away, Mr. Paxton, because—because men in a fight never know when to quit. I’m not going to blame anyone for my father’s death, Mr. Paxton. Don’t misunderstand me. He may have been as much to blame for it himself as anyone else. He never would give in.”

She paused and Paxton nodded his head slowly as if assenting in a general way to what she had said.

“But I don’t think it should have been necessary,” Jule went on. “There should have been some way for my father and you and others to work together.”

Again Paxton nodded his head slowly.

“I’ve come to tell you that another man is going to be broken in the same way—and to tell you that it isn’t right. I never saw Mr. Tyne until yesterday. I thought he was strong and—like you. But he isn’t. He can’t fight any more. He’s like my father was when he came home after losing everything in the rapids. He can’t go on if he has to fight his way through.”

She paused and looked away a moment before she continued.

“And I’ve come,” she said at last in a voice that was very much softer, “I’ve come to ask you something. Isn’t there room enough here for us all? Can’t we work together and live together and—and make it pay?”

Her last words seemed pathetically weak but she waited, nevertheless, to see what response Paxton would make.

“I’m afraid you don’t understand, Miss Allen,” he began.

“I do understand,” she protested. “I understand all there is that’s worth understanding about it. I understand he wants to beat you and I understand you want to beat him.”

Paxton laughed lightly. “Well that’s putting it in very simple language, Miss Allen,” he replied.

“Well, isn’t there room for both of you if you only thought so?” she urged.

“The difficulty is in getting people to think so,” Paxton explained.

“Mr. Tyne thinks so now.”

Paxton laughed aloud. “I know he does, but he didn’t think so three months ago.”

“Well, I want to propose something,” Jule said without attempting to reply to Paxton’s observation. “You came to me only a few days ago about the water power on Ripple Creek. You said you would respect my wishes regarding the rapids. I’m afraid I wasn’t very nice about it, but I couldn’t think of anyone spoiling the most beautiful thing I have ever known. And I wouldn’t have let you do it, in spite of your lease and law and everything. But I have changed my mind. I know you will think it isn’t in my power to change your plans. But—anyhow—I’ll be willing to see anything done to the rapids—and I won’t say a word—if you’ll leave Henry Tyne free—if you’ll be content to do your work here and let him do his over there. That’s my business, Mr. Paxton.”

Paxton turned to her with his most patronizing air. “My dear Miss Allen, you should not call this business. It isn’t business. It’s sentiment, and the two don’t mix.”

Jule’s eyes deepened and her lips tightened as she listened to him.

“I don’t think it is good business, in this case, for you to say that to me.”

“I was merely expressing my opinion—an opinion I have formed after years in the world of business.”

She got up abruptly and turned to go. “I had thought that even in the business world men would listen to what was reasonable.”

Through the window of his cabin Paxton caught the reflection of the sun glancing from a wet paddle. Lifting his head he peered in the direction of the bay. Two men were approaching the landing just below the slope on which Paxton’s camp stood.

“Here’s Tyne now,” Paxton announced and Jule paused only long enough to glance towards the bay before hurrying out of the office.

“You will at least not tell them I have been here,” she requested and was gone before he had time to make reply.

Paxton may be forgiven for the feeling of nervousness he experienced as he turned again and busied himself with the papers scattered about on his table. He had looked forward to this moment for months and had often

wondered just where and under what circumstances the big event of his business career should occur.

He looked up at the sound of Kirk Brander's voice in the doorway. With all the dignity the occasion seemed to call for and with much more show of cordiality than it warranted, he got to his feet and, disregarding Kirk, advanced to meet Henry Tyne, offering his hand in greeting. Tyne accepted the hand with a word of quiet greeting and taking off his hat went to the chair that Jule had vacated only a few minutes previously. Kirk sat on a bench not far from the doorway where he could see the faces of both Paxton and his uncle.

Henry Tyne lost no time in getting to the business of his visit.

"I'll not take your time, Warren," he said in the manner and tone of voice he had used for years whenever he had talked to Paxton.

"We're never rushed in this country," Paxton smiled.

"Well, an unpleasant task is best over with," Tyne replied. "Besides, Kirk, here, has to get back to the mine."

He cleared his voice and straightened up in his chair. "You see I've come to you at last," he proceeded. "One of us had to come sooner or later. I guess it's my turn this time."

"I've done my share of it, Henry," Paxton replied, and for a moment it was as if the two men had met to settle a little wager on a friendly game.

"There's no use trying to conceal anything," Tyne continued. "We have known pretty well where we stood all along. I could have swung this ten years ago and five men of your size, Warren, couldn't have stopped me. But when a man has had his day, he's done. You'll have yours just like the rest of us."

Paxton stroked his chin slowly in contemplation of Tyne's remark, but he offered no reply.

"I've come all the way in here to see if I could save some of the pieces. I had a talk with Bradley and Collins before I left and one or two of the others. It's all in your hands, Warren—just where you wanted it. It looks as if I'm going to have to pull out and leave the field to you. I'm going to make no bones about it. If I'm forced to quit I'm practically cleaned out. I'm not whining about it. I'm simply telling you what's true. If we can reach some sort of understanding I may make it go even yet."

Paxton shook his head. "It can't be made to go, Henry," he protested, "unless the whole property is worked as one. There isn't enough ore in either mine to make it worth while. I didn't know that when I started work here or I wouldn't have spent a dollar on the place. The grade is low and the whole body can be run out in ten years. With our problem of transportation it would be a dead loss. There's only one possible way out, and I think you know what it is. Our two properties and the White Squaw claims must be consolidated under one company."

"That's really my proposition, Warren," Tyne put in suddenly. "I'll admit I'm trying to save my own scalp when I make the suggestion but I'm here to work out a basis on which we can consolidate our interests and work the two properties as one."

"That might have been possible six months ago," Paxton remarked.

"What's the barrier now?"

"The usual thing, I suppose. You entered the field as a competitor without any warning."

"I couldn't have got in any other way," Tyne explained.

"That's true, but it doesn't alter the fact that we have lost practically a year and a few thousand of valuable capital besides as a result of the competition. When you consider, in addition to that fact, that we are on the eve of taking the Micmac over anyhow—we're prepared to go ahead where you leave off—your plan wouldn't improve our position. I don't think you would get them to listen to the suggestion."

"You mean, of course, I can't get you to listen to the suggestion," Tyne corrected.

"You can be very outspoken sometimes," Paxton smiled.

Paxton's air of condescension was so apparent that Kirk Brander, sitting a few feet away, felt it difficult to control himself. It became even more difficult when Paxton turned his thin smile towards Kirk as if he wished to tell him that at last he was beginning to make good his boast. But when Henry Tyne, unable to say more, got up from his chair and looked about him in a bewildered fashion as if he did not know the way to the door, Kirk sprang to his feet and faced Paxton, leaning towards him with his two hands before him on the table.

"Then perhaps you'll listen to this suggestion," he said, bringing his face down close to Paxton's. "You think you're going to put this over because

Henry Tyne is done. Well, listen to this, Warren K. Paxton. I've been developing a hunch for about two weeks. Now I'm going to play it. Before another week Henry Tyne will show you some of his old form. By the first of September he'll tell you to go to hell. I'll not say any more just now except this—keep that bootlegging gang of yours out of my camp or I'll drown them in the lake. Do you get that?"

Paxton sniffed a little and moved to get up.

"Do you get that?" Kirk repeated and leaned so close that Paxton settled back again into his chair.

"I think Warren got that, all right," Henry Tyne observed in a tone that expressed much of the enjoyment he was getting from the situation.

"Come on, Unk," said Kirk, turning quickly and pulling his hat down on his head. "Let's get out—we're busy."

A few minutes later Phil Roche, having by chance seen Kirk and Henry Tyne on their way back across the bay, came into the office to learn the outcome of their visit.

Paxton looked up at him as he entered. "It looks as if they have struck it," he remarked, in answer to Roche's questioning look.

"Struck it?"

"The high grade stuff," Paxton explained. "I always knew they'd come to it if they had long enough to do it. Brander gave a hint."

"Are you sure they're into it? Brander may be bluffin'."

Paxton sniffed a little.

"We'd better play him the same as if he held the highest hand in the deck," he advised.

CHAPTER XXII.

Paxton's guess was not far from the point. At a depth of two hundred feet Kirk's men had drifted into a new body of ore that early promised to equal the high grade of the Lucky Strike. Day after day, and night after night Kirk followed the process of uncovering the new vein and sampled the rich ore frequently. With Henry Tyne and Marion Curtis he went over the results of each day's drilling and with the help of the two visiting engineers made rough estimates based upon the showings of the day.

"There's nothing to it," Kirk exclaimed one evening as he looked at a half dozen flakes of free copper that lay on the table before him. "We've got it here—and you can tell the world whenever you feel like it."

"Two weeks is a short time to tell the world about it—and get results that will be worth anything to us," Henry Tyne observed.

"Two weeks is long enough to make a try," Marion Curtis commented. "I'd have a whole week in Winnipeg."

"It isn't much," Tyne observed.

"A week is a week," Marion Curtis declared. "I'm going to leave in the morning."

"I'll send Tuck out with you," Kirk suggested. "We'll keep Unk here to talk to John Mackay when he gets back. If he gets tired sitting around we'll give him a day now and then with the muckers."

Marion left immediately for Jule Allen's cabin, Kirk accompanying her. As they passed the door of the sampling room Kirk paused a moment before the open doorway to speak to Tuck Roberts.

"You'd better get on in and have a little sleep, Tuck," he said. "I want you to go to The Pas in the morning. Don't bother going down the shaft to-night. I'll go down and look things over myself on the way back."

Tuck received the announcement without comment and prepared at once to leave the work he was doing. And as they walked along in the darkness, Kirk and Marion Curtis hurriedly arranged the details of the plans which the new discovery had set into motion. Kirk paused at the door of the cabin and

took his leave hurriedly in order to get back again to the mine for an hour with Dags before turning in for the night.

“You’ll be back again in two weeks,” Kirk said, shaking hands with her when he was ready to leave.

“Yes,” she replied, “and, by George, this thing is going to go over!”

They shook hands and Kirk strode towards the camp.

As he approached the door of the engine-house someone came out suddenly and disappeared in the darkness. Kirk paused for a moment and then entered. He took his rubber coat from the wall and belting it round him, took down a carbide lamp from a shelf, shook it once, and lighted it. No one was about at the moment and he stepped through the small doorway into the outer shed that stood above Shaft Number One. It did not occur to him as strange that neither Dags nor the hoist man was anywhere in sight. It was already past midnight and the men were probably resting somewhere during the hour’s recess. But he could not help feeling a little curious about the figure he had merely had a glimpse of as he entered the engine-house.

Without waiting to be lowered into the shaft, he turned the little pencil of flame from his carbide lamp towards the square timbered hole in the ground. The water on the rungs of the ladder glistened faintly in the light. Slowly he made his way down the shaft, his feet feeling for the slippery rungs in the darkness. As the light from his lamp dimmed he shook it until the flame spurted brightly and lighted up the wet glistening walls of the shaft. As he descended the sound of water trickling down the walls grew more distinct.

When he came to the last rung of the ladder he put one foot down in the darkness and felt for the bottom of the shaft. He touched water and withdrawing his foot again, shook his lamp and held it beneath him. A pool of black water several inches deep filled the depression in the rock where the shaft ended. The heavy steel bucket stood nearly half submerged and empty at the end of its cable. Close to the shaft stood an ore car with no ore in it.

“Jove, you’d think these fellows had gone off on a week’s vacation,” he muttered to himself.

Then suddenly it struck him that the place was unusually quiet. “What’s the matter?” he said aloud. “The pumps aren’t working.”

He heard the voices of the men at the far end of the tunnel. Placing a foot on the edge of the big steel bucket and seizing the cable to steady himself, he leaped across the shaft and landed on solid footing between the rails. Giving his lamp another shake he started off along the narrow track,

his eyes peering before him into the pitchy blackness of underground. A hundred feet or so from the shaft he saw a point of light approaching him out of the darkness ahead. It was coming very quickly and Kirk's ears caught the sound of running feet clumsily stumbling over the uneven floor of the tunnel. The light from his own lamp was very low. He shook it again gently, then violently—the pencil of flame shortened to a mere point and went out. He gave the little wheel at the side of the reflector a sharp turn. A little shower of sparks flew from the flint but there was no light. Again he shook the lamp, holding it close to his ear.

“Hang it—it’s empty!” he muttered.

He looked again towards the point of light coming towards him. It was only a few yards away, its bearer stumbling forward in clumsy haste.

“Hello,” Kirk called. “What’s the hurry?”

The point of light stopped suddenly. Then as Kirk moved forward it moved slowly, cautiously, Kirk thought, to one side. Suddenly it went out and they were in pitchy darkness. To Kirk's challenging question there came no reply. He moved back a little on the defensive. Away at the other end of the tunnel four or five pin-points of light moved about against the blackness. Though the lights were almost invisible, nothing could pass between them and Kirk without being discovered. He crouched low against one wall, hugging the jagged angles of slimy rock in an effort to get a glimpse of the man who was using the darkness of the tunnel to hide his identity.

He had waited less than a minute when the points of light were shut from his view. From the suddenness with which all the lights vanished at once he knew the obstruction was very close. Suddenly a bit of rock clanked lightly against the steel rail of the track that ran along the floor of the tunnel. The noise sounded not more than three or four feet away. With a bound forward Kirk threw his arms out before him ready to seize whatever they encountered or to defend himself against any attack. For a fraction of a second he had the feeling of throwing himself over the side of a precipice, on the mere chance of coming to rest in a tree just a few feet over the edge. Then, even before he expected it, his rush was stopped suddenly and the next moment he was grappling blindly with an opponent whose awkward strength and sheer desperation gave Kirk all he could do to keep the advantage he had gained in the first shock of his attack. After a brief moment of uncertainty, however, Kirk secured a hold about the man's waist and by sheer strength of muscle bent him backwards until he relaxed and went down. Holding him with both hands Kirk felt around in the darkness

with his two feet for the carbide lamp his antagonist had dropped. When he encountered it only a few feet away he reached for it with one hand, shook it a little and gave the little wheel a quick turn. The tiny flame shot from the lamp suddenly and Kirk turned the light on the face of the man beneath him. It was Joe Bedard.

Without speaking Kirk got up and dragged the half-breed to his feet. His eyes were half closed and his expression was that of a man in a half stupor. From somewhere above his forehead a stream of blood ran from under his hair and down his face. He looked stupidly at Kirk for a moment and then put out his hands as if to save himself from falling. Realizing that Bedard was probably badly hurt Kirk put one arm about him to steady him. The half-breed relaxed sickeningly and would have gone to the ground had Kirk not kept him on his feet.

“What’s the matter, Joe?” he asked, but Bedard offered no word of reply.

“Jove, you’ve got yours somewhere,” he remarked to himself.

Then suddenly he was aware of the voice of old Dags, lifted in lurid profanity as he came down the tunnel, lamp in hand, driving a couple of men before him. Kirk turned and held his light towards Dags. The effect was to heighten the old man’s anger. When Kirk held the lamp high so as to throw the light on his own face Dags halted suddenly and commanded his two prisoners to do likewise.

“Take these bums out o’ here an’ throw them into the lake,” he said as he recognized Kirk. Then as his eyes fell upon Joe Bedard he rushed towards him. “There you are, you half-caste son of a dog!” he cried and Kirk had all he could do to keep Bedard on his feet and hold Dags off.

“Just a minute, Dagsie,” he protested, “he’s all in—can’t stand on his own feet.”

“Take him out and throw him into the lake,” Dags persisted.

“What’s the matter, Dagsie?” Kirk asked, still holding him away from Bedard.

“Matter?” roared Dags. “The bootleggin’ mongrels—stopped the works—knocked the whole shift cold—two of ’em got away—Phil Roche an’ that — —”

He broke off suddenly and made a desperate attempt to get at Bedard. But Kirk swung Bedard out of the way and stood between him and Dags.

“You’ve done enough for now,” Kirk said quietly. “We don’t want to kill him—I’m going to use him if he gets his senses back.”

Dags caught a glimpse of the half-breed’s face marked with its stream of blood.

“Holy mackinaw!” he exclaimed. “You pretty near fixed him, eh?”

“I did?” Kirk asked in surprise.

“Yes—look!”

Kirk looked at Dags in surprise. “I didn’t do that,” he said. “I thought you— —”

“Who hit you?” Dags interrupted, addressing Bedard suddenly.

But Joe Bedard drew his grimy hand across his face and laid his fingers over the wound in his scalp—and remained silent.

“Let’s get them out of here,” Kirk said leading the way and taking Bedard along with him. “Come along, Joe, you’re going to stay with me for a few days.”

Bedard offered no protest but shuffled along willingly enough behind Kirk. The two miners followed, Dags bringing up the rear.

“But where in blazes is Tuck?” Dags asked as they filed down the tunnel. “Isn’t he workin’ here any more?”

“I took him off to-night,” Kirk replied briefly. “Special duty, Dags.”

Dags grunted. “He picked a fine night for special dutyin’,” he growled.

CHAPTER XXIII.

They made their way slowly up the long ladders to the top of the shaft, resting here and there on the way to give Bedard an opportunity to gather strength enough to continue the climb. Although the half-breed preserved complete silence before their questionings and offered no voluntary word of his own to account for his battered condition, it was quite apparent that it required all the remaining strength he could command to get to the top of the shaft. More than once Kirk had to assist him and their pauses for rest were frequent and sometimes lengthy.

When they finally stepped one after another into the boiler room and came out into the light from one of the large lamps, Kirk left Dags to look after the two miners for a moment while he led Bedard into the best light the place afforded and, parting the matted black hair very carefully, examined the wound.

“Jove, this will have to get attention for a few days,” he remarked as he looked closely at the ugly gash from which the blood flowed freely.

Then he stepped back and looked at Bedard, holding him at arm’s length with his two hands on his shoulders.

Again Bedard’s silence greeted Kirk’s question and his face was as expressionless as if he had not heard his voice.

“Phil Roche did it!” Dags snapped angrily. “Joe knows that—and I know it.”

“Did Roche hit you?” Kirk asked.

But the half-breed’s silence remained unbroken. Only this time his face twitched slightly as from the pain in the wound and he turned about in a dazed manner as if looking for an opportunity to get out into the air.

“You’re going to stay with me for a few days,” Kirk said taking his arm and going towards the door. “Come on, Dags. We’ll go up to the office and straighten things out a little.”

They climbed the trail from the engine-house to the cabins on the ridge above, Kirk supporting Bedard with the help of one of the miners. When

they had laid the half-breed on a mattress, Kirk gave him a cup of water and then turned to the two miners.

“You two fellows go and get your stuff together and bring it down here,” he said. “Dags, go with them and bring them back. See that they don’t talk to anyone.”

Dags and the two men went out and Kirk turned at once to the task of bathing Bedard’s wound. At the end of half an hour Dags and his men entered the door to find Bedard’s head dressed in a clean white towel and his face washed of all the grime and blood with which it had been smeared. Bedard was resting quietly, his eyes closed and his face relaxed and expressionless.

“Now, you fellows,” Kirk said suddenly addressing the two miners, “you come with us and stay where we can keep an eye on you. To-morrow afternoon you can get away with the freighters. But if I catch either of you speaking a word to anyone, God have mercy on you. We’ve started in now and we’ll do murder if necessary before this thing is done. Do you get that?”

The men made no audible reply but Kirk knew from the expressions on their faces that they understood. He was not bluffing and they knew it.

“Leave your stuff here,” he said, taking their packs and throwing them into a corner. “Now, get down.”

He looked once again at Joe Bedard. “He’ll be all right there till we come back,” he said to Dags. “He couldn’t move away if he wanted to.”

But as a precaution he locked the store-room door before turning away to join Dags and the two miners on their way back to the engine-house.

When Kirk emerged from the shaft an hour or so before sunrise he was grime from head to foot and weary beyond description. But the work was going on again almost as smoothly as if nothing had happened.

When he got to the cabin he found Tuck Roberts already busy with preparations for his trip to The Pas. Giving him only the most meagre account of what had happened during the night, he joined in the work of getting things in readiness for the trip. One of the freighters, a half-breed packer, was selected to accompany Tuck and by the time the sun was showing through the trees the three were on their way to Jule Allen’s cabin. Henry Tyne they left enjoying the luxury of his early morning sleep. He had said all he could the night before and Kirk slipped away without waking him.

They found Jule and Marion Curtis finishing their breakfast, preparations for Marion's departure having been completed. Despatching Tuck and the packer to get the canoe loaded and into the water, Kirk entered the cabin and seated himself near the doorway. Marion's smile grew into laughter as she looked at him, grime-covered from head to foot.

Kirk explained briefly his appearance and made due apologies. A few minutes later they went down to where the men were waiting in the canoe. Marion's leave-taking was hurried and very impersonal, except that she could not resist a smile as she looked at Kirk, more grimy than ever, it seemed, in the fresh light of the morning sun. And for some reason that he could not clearly explain her smile roused in him a feeling of resentment.

"I guess I should have cleaned up a little," he said as he turned away with Jule after they had watched until the canoe had vanished round a bend in the creek. "But I really hadn't time."

Jule looked at him out of eyes that showed how completely she shared his feeling of resentment. "I don't think it matters," she said quietly. "In fact I think I rather like you better the way you are."

"I shall never look at water again," Kirk laughed and left her to hurry back again to the camp.

It was almost noon before Kirk could leave the work at the mine long enough to give any attention to Joe Bedard. He had left word with his clerk to go to him in case he should call and to look in on him two or three times during the morning but under no circumstances to let him out or allow anyone to see him.

When at last he unlocked the store-room door, opened it and looked in, Bedard turned his head slightly and made an effort to sit up.

"Better stay where you are, Joe," Kirk advised, seeing how difficult it was for him to move.

Bedard lay back again and allowed Kirk to take the dressing from the wound and examine it. He spent nearly half an hour bathing it and dressing it afresh. Then he sat back and looked for a moment at the stolid face that was beginning to show the marks of suffering. After all, he thought, Bedard was human. He had been the willing tool of Phil Roche but he had been a mere tool, after all. And Kirk was moved almost to pity for him now that he lay helpless and deserted by the men who had used him as a means to the end they sought.

“You’ve got to have more attention than I can give you, Joe,” he said finally, “more attention and better attention.”

Bedard’s face was towards the door. Suddenly it lighted and Kirk saw his eyes brighten.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“See her—Ruth,” the half-breed grunted and Kirk turned to see Ruth Mackay entering the doorway.

On seeing Joe Bedard, Ruth came forward quietly and looked down at him. There passed over her face a look of surprise mingled with pity and Kirk got up as she pressed closer and looked into the half-breed’s face. Kirk saw more in that look than he had ever seen in Ruth Mackay’s face before. He had always seen sympathy and sincerity there. Now there was an expression half furtive, half savage, that spoke volumes. Before her was a man bred, like herself, of two races, and suffering largely because of his mixed blood. Only she, or someone else of her kind, could feel for Joe Bedard as she felt.

Even as Kirk explained hastily and as best he could all that had happened the night before, Ruth Mackay was busy doing what she could to make Bedard more comfortable. And as Kirk watched them he realized that the half-breed’s face was less stolid and his expression less indifferent. When Kirk had explained Tuck’s hurried departure for The Pas, he went off to get a little rest and left Ruth alone with Bedard.

From that time forward Joe Bedard was under the care of Ruth Mackay. He had developed a high fever and was in need of constant attention.

Late that afternoon John Mackay returned home. He had met Tuck Roberts and Marion Curtis on the way and lost no time in looking up Henry Tyne after he drew his canoe out of the water before his cabin. The first conference between the two men was brief and very pointed. John Mackay was in his usual silent mood. He heard Tyne’s statement. He expressed his own doubts in as few words as necessary. He listened to Tyne’s reply. Then he walked off towards Jule Allen’s cabin where he had business that needed attention. He would wait for a few days to think it over. Perhaps Mrs. Curtis would be back before the last day of August, in which case their course of action would be clear. Perhaps she wouldn’t come in time to take up the option before it expired. In that case the situation would be altered. At any rate he had business just now, and off he went leaving Henry Tyne to curse the old man’s attitude of independence.

Kirk laughed. "They're nearly all alike, Unk," he said. "The old-timers act as if they didn't care a tinker's hoot whether they sold their claims or not. But they have their human side as well."

That John Mackay, at least, had his human side was proven later that evening when he came back in his canoe with his daughter and, while Ruth attended to Joe Bedard in the store-room, went to Kirk's cabin where he chatted pleasantly and told stories of the wilds that made Henry Tyne forget there was such a thing as a copper mine in existence. And then he told of old John Allen and his loss.

"An' I've been figurin' a bit on that same event," he concluded meditatively. "John Allen's loss wasn't all an accident. Though we'll never know but it was, old John was too damn' pertickler to put cables on trees jist to have 'em slip off again."

Old Dags had been lying in his bunk listening without comment to the talk that had been going round. Suddenly he sat up and put his feet out upon the floor.

"That's what I said the day it happened, John," he declared.

"That's what I told John Allen himself before he died," John Mackay admitted.

As if to give embodiment to the suspicions that arose vaguely in the minds of them all, a step sounded outdoors and they looked up to see Warren Paxton's form filling the doorway. He came in just far enough to see Kirk Brander and Henry Tyne. There was no suspicion of a smile on his face. He was serious, if not angry.

"Brander," he said abruptly, "you have one of my men in your camp, held here against his will."

"Did he say so?" Kirk asked.

"It doesn't matter a damn whether he said so or not," Paxton snapped. "I'm here to bring him back where he belongs."

"You're right, Paxton," Kirk replied, "it doesn't matter. Joe Bedard isn't going back anyhow."

"He isn't, eh?"

Paxton turned and spoke to someone waiting in the darkness behind him. Another figure came forward and stepped into the doorway. Kirk recognized Willoughby of the Saskatchewan Provincial Constabulary.

"Hello, Willoughby," he greeted him.

Willoughby's manner was pleasant. "Hello, Brander," he replied quietly. "Don't you think you'd better hand over Joe and save trouble for everybody?"

Kirk's face expressed his consternation. "Since when did the Saskatchewan police get power to act in Manitoba, Willoughby?" he asked. "You're about five hundred yards from Saskatchewan."

Willoughby's manner was unchanged. "I know all about that, Brander," he said quietly. "We don't get round our patrols more than two or three times in a season and we're always willing to help settle disputes. If Bedard is here against his will you're breaking the law and sooner or later we'll get you anyhow. I just want to save trouble."

"If you don't hand him over, I'll bring enough men over here to clean out your camp," Paxton threatened.

"Seems to me, Paxton, your feet aren't tracking straight to-night," Kirk replied. "If Willoughby allows that kind of thing to happen with him on the ground, there ought to be some way of putting both you and him into a whole peck of trouble."

"Trouble be damned," Paxton roared. "I want Joe Bedard back where he belongs or I'm coming to take him!"

Suddenly John Mackay got up from where he had been sitting and moved into the range of Paxton's vision.

"An' I say nobody's go in' to lay a hand on Joe Bedard till he plumb well wants to go," he said in a voice that was maddening in its finality. "My girl has come over to get Joe an' bring him back where he can get the right kind of attention. An' she's goin' to get him."

Paxton stepped back suddenly as if he had been hit. After a moment or two of silence his thin smile gradually got the better of a look of pained surprise and he stepped towards John Mackay.

"I'm glad you're back," he said, offering his hand.

John Mackay accepted the greeting non-committally. Paxton turned to Willoughby, his manner completely changed.

"Willoughby I want you to meet John Mackay," he said pleasantly. "This is Mr. Willoughby of the Saskatchewan force, John."

"Is it?" John Mackay retorted without moving.

“And, of course, if Mr. Mackay wants Joe to stay with him for a day or so, the case is altogether different. There won’t be any trouble over that.”

He turned and seemed on the point of leaving. “I’m coming over to talk business with you as soon as you get rested up from your cruise, John,” he said.

“I don’t get tired, Mr. Paxton,” John Mackay replied. “If I did I’d think I was gettin’ old or something.”

Paxton’s laugh seemed genuine enough even if it was a little forced. “I’ll come over in the morning, then,” he suggested.

John Mackay spat into the ashes in front of the stove that stood in the middle of the room.

“I’m not talkin’ business till the last day of August—or maybe the first of September,” he said casually.

Paxton turned his smile upon Kirk and Henry Tyne.

“We can wait,” he said drily.

CHAPTER XXIV.

For the days that followed, Joe Bedard remained under John Mackay's roof and received care at the hands of his daughter. With Tuck Roberts gone Kirk had little time to spend away from the work in the mine but occasionally he made his way to Mackay's cabin to enquire concerning Bedard's condition. That his visits should have been timed for the most part to coincide exactly with those of Jule Allen, whether by accident or design, may be taken merely as a matter of record.

For a few days, at least, Bedard's condition was almost serious. But Ruth Mackay's patience and her native instincts won out in the end. Kirk was careful not to interfere in any way with Ruth's work but when the last sign of the fever had subsided Kirk faced Bedard with the deliberate intention of carrying out the plan that had been in his mind for some days. Joe Bedard, he felt sure, had secrets, the revelation of which might be of value either in dismissing or in vindicating suspicions that he held concerning not only Phil Roche but Warren Paxton as well. Two nights in succession he strove merely to get the half-breed to talk. On the second evening he succeeded in learning that Roche had struck the blow that had laid Bedard out that night in the tunnel. They had quarrelled over some miscarriage of plans for which Roche had held Bedard responsible. When Kirk pressed for more details concerning the nature of the plans, Bedard looked once at Ruth Mackay and lapsed into silence. Kirk resolved to wait until the next night before he asked any more questions.

As he approached John Mackay's cabin the following night he saw Phil Roche pushing off in his canoe. He could not have seen Kirk who was hidden by the close undergrowth through which he was walking, and Kirk permitted him to get well away before he approached the cabin. That night Joe Bedard was silent to all his questions. Growing impatient, Kirk tried threats with much the same result. The half-breed was not going to be forced either into making confessions on his own part or into revealing secrets in the lives of others.

"You'd better leave him," John Mackay suggested. "One drop o' Cree blood in a man's veins an' if he don't want to talk you couldn't make him if you set him on hot coals."

Before Kirk left that evening, John Mackay called him outside on the pretext of looking at some samples of ore he had picked up on a recent expedition.

"There's no use tryin' to get that boy to talk," the old prospector said when they were alone. "Phil was here this evening an' they had a few words in private. From this time on, Joe Bedard isn't speakin' to anyone, unless maybe, the girl. But you're not goin' to get anything out o' her. She's a lot of her mother in her."

"I'd never ask Ruth," Kirk replied.

"Something's been on the girl's mind lately," John Mackay continued. "It's been worryin' her bad an' she won't talk. She's changed—just in the last few days or so—an' I don't like it. She's troubled."

"It may be all right again when Tuck comes back," Kirk suggested.

"That's it," Mackay replied quickly. "Are you sure the lad is comin' back. Men have queer ways with them sometimes."

Kirk was startled at the suggestion. "Tuck will be back," he said with confidence. "And he's going to be back on or before the last day of August. I'm banking on Tuck—and Tuck has never failed me yet."

"He'll come—if he can," John Mackay replied, "I feel sure of that too."

"Sure," Kirk declared.

But on the way back to camp that night he could not free himself from the feeling of uneasiness that John Mackay's words had given him. And through the days that followed the feeling persisted until something like dark presentiment seized him and he found himself longing for Tuck's return as if not only the fate of their enterprise but life itself hung on his coming.

But the days passed and Tuck did not come, though throughout the last week in August they watched constantly every approach to the camp to catch the first glimpse of him. And in the meanwhile Joe Bedard slipped away from Mackay's cabin without Kirk's knowing and disappeared from the district without speaking a word to anyone unless to Ruth Mackay—but Ruth said nothing.

It was a crestfallen pair of men that took the trail to John Mackay's cabin in the late afternoon of that last day in August. They had waited impatiently all day, confident that Tuck and Marion Curtis would arrive any minute. Henry Tyne had spent most of the day with Jule Allen at her cabin, to be on hand in case Tuck should come. Kirk had done his best to carry on the work

he had at hand to do, though most of his efforts had been ineffective and blundering. For once he found himself hopelessly dependent upon others. Though he refused to allow his confidence in Marion Curtis and Tuck Roberts to wane, he had begun vaguely to anticipate what it would be like if within the next day or two he should be forced to leave the country, beaten and a failure, as he had come into it. A few minutes before, they had seen Paxton's canoe leave the landing and start across the lake towards Mackay's cabin. And now, as Kirk followed his uncle along the pathway he thought the old man's shoulders drooped more and his step was more labored than it had been for days.

They found Paxton in the cabin with John Mackay. Sitting on the lakeshore where the canoe waited, was Paxton's young clerk. Kirk had expected to see Phil Roche and his surprise made him wonder what had kept Roche away. Ruth Mackay got up from where she had been sitting when Kirk and Henry Tyne entered and turning a troubled look upon Kirk, went out.

John Mackay was in a very reticent mood. He received the greetings of Kirk and his uncle with little show of cordiality and invited them to seats at a comfortable distance from where Paxton was sitting. Then he set aside the pipe he had been smoking and settled down in his chair, a little ill at ease. The place he had been in the habit of regarding as his home was now a place of business, where sentiment, for the time being, should not be allowed to enter. Men whom he had treated always as friends, even if his treatment had been anything but familiar, were now merely the moving figures in a contest in which he was referee. The fact did not please him any too well and yet—it was precisely the situation his imagination had pictured for days and he did not shrink from the unpleasantness of it.

"I have no wish to waste either your time or my own, John," Paxton said suddenly and in a tone that clearly indicated his increasing confidence in the final outcome of the whole affair.

"I am ready to go on anytime," John Mackay said simply.

"There need be no delay on our account," Henry Tyne observed.

Paxton assumed a manner that was almost pompous. "I can state my business in a very few words," he said. "I had hoped to have had a few minutes with you privately so that—"

"We'll be glad to withdraw — —" Henry Tyne began.

"I think it would be as well to say what you have to say in each other's hearin'," John Mackay interrupted. "There'll be no misunderstandin', then, one way or another. Anyhow—it's business, an' business that we're not ashamed of. We can afford to talk about it among ourselves openly and without keepin' anything back. Go on, Mr. Paxton."

"You will remember," Paxton went on, "that I was in the field for the Micmac before Mr. Tyne secured the present option on the property. Conditions I couldn't control made it possible for Mr. Tyne to establish his position before I could complete the arrangements I had in mind. To-day we have reached the time when Mr. Tyne's option expires. I am in the field again and am ready to make my offer as soon as I know that the property is on the market again. It is just as well, perhaps, that Mr. Tyne is here. He can tell us pretty definitely what his intentions are."

"Mr. Tyne has until midnight to-night to tell what his intentions are," John Mackay reminded Paxton.

"There is no need of reminding Mr. Paxton of that," Henry Tyne observed quietly. "The time is getting short now—it's only a matter of a few hours till we know what our position will be. Mrs. Curtis may be back yet, of course, but I am not sure what will be the nature of the news she will have for us. It may not be favorable when she does come."

"Have you any proposition to make, Mr. Tyne?" John Mackay asked.

"I have. The work has gone on steadily on the Micmac since the day we secured an option on the property. We have suffered some little setbacks and a few obstructions but we have not only lived up to the letter of our contract—we have done more, actually, than the contract called for. We have done more work, we have spent more money, because we have had confidence in the property and wanted to make it show up."

"What is your proposition, Mr. Tyne?" John Mackay urged.

"It's this. I believe we are entitled to some concession, Mr. Mackay. The property has begun to show high grade ore in quantities that we think will bear out our expectations. We ought to have an opportunity of developing the property, say, for another six weeks, or until the freeze-up. If the showing continues good we could then be given an opportunity of taking up the option and buying the property outright."

"You mean, then, to have the option extended for another six weeks or so," John Mackay remarked.

"If such an arrangement could be reached," Henry Tyne replied.

“And you,” John Mackay said turning towards Paxton, “you are lookin’ to a year’s option on the place.”

“That’s what we’re seeking—and we’re ready to make payment as soon as we know the property has been released,” Paxton affirmed.

John Mackay sat a moment in uneasy silence. “It seems to me, Mr. Tyne,” he said at last, “that as a matter of mere business Mr. Paxton’s proposition goes a little farther than yours and ought to be worth more.”

He thought a moment longer. “Suppose we could arrange another six weeks, Mr. Tyne, can you pay me the money for the extension before the expiration of our present contract?”

“That will depend again upon the arrival of Mrs. Curtis,” Henry Tyne admitted.

“While I don’t wish to influence your judgment unduly,” Paxton offered, “it must be clear that Mr. Tyne’s position is a very uncertain one. It seems to me that in matters of this kind the man with the ready money has the argument.”

Kirk, who had listened to the discussion in silence, a silence in which hope and despair battled within him, realized the full weight of Paxton’s statements. Money, after all, made the argument. If Marion Curtis did not return, or if she returned without sufficient money to renew the contract, their case would be hopeless, the game would be up for them. And then it came to Kirk as clearly as if a voice within him had spoken, that the value he had placed on the property was not a money value at all. Here in the task itself he had found what his heart had hungered for. Should he be forced to quit, the future and the dreams he had had would become as nothing. He could not bear the thought. He got to his feet. He stepped towards John Mackay and stood a moment before him in silence while his mind seized more clearly the idea that had suddenly blossomed there.

“Money, John Mackay—money is not the whole argument,” he said. “For you who have lived in the north for years, even for me, this is not altogether a case of money. This is your country—it is my country—I never realized that till just now. You have lived here. You don’t want to go away from here. I have lived here. I want to go on living here. I want to make this place a better place for human beings to live—not a worse place. I don’t want to take the wealth out of here and spend it in the big cities. I want to bring people here—I want to see men and women here—and busy streets—and human life in the making. I want to see some of our dreams—your dreams and my dreams—become facts. And that’s why I want another

chance to make good. We haven't failed—not yet. It'll take time. But he — —” Kirk pointed towards Paxton, “—he'll fail even when he makes the biggest success he ever dreamed of making. He'll fail because—because he doesn't care for our kind of success.”

Kirk's impassioned appeal brought John Mackay out of his uneasy attitude. He sat forward and reached again for his pipe. He began filling it leisurely, looking at Kirk and then at Henry Tyne and Warren Paxton as if he wished to see if they heard what he did.

“And what is your proposition, Brander?” he asked as Kirk made a pause.

“I have nothing to give, John Mackay,” he replied, “nothing but a promise—a promise to go on working as I have worked—to show the world what we have and to tell them we don't go begging—that they can come to us. And when we've got what we are working for—to keep it here, to build our own city and make our own homes and—and live our own lives.”

“Seems to me we're getting away from the point,” Paxton suggested.

John Mackay placed the match to his pipe and puffed a moment. “Either that—or we haven't been on the point an' are gettin' to it now,” he said slowly. “It's either one or th' other—that's certain.”

Paxton was clearly growing impatient. “I've made a proposition,” he said, “and Henry Tyne has made a proposition. It's for you to decide between us, John.”

“Or leave you both out of it,” John Mackay smiled, “an' talk business with Brander.”

“Brander hasn't put a business proposition, at all,” Paxton protested. “He's got a lot of poor sentiment that isn't worth a dollar—and sentiment won't run a mine.”

“Well,” John Mackay observed, getting up from his chair as a signal that the discussion was at an end for the present at least, “a man must have time to think. Nothing can be done about it till midnight anyhow—that's some hours off. By that time I'll be asleep an' won't be movin' round much before sun-up to-morrow mornin'. When I've slept on it for a night—thought it over in my own bed and on my own place—there'll be time enough to talk about it.”

He went to the door of his cabin and looking out, drew a deep breath as if he wished to brace himself to meet the problem he was facing.

“There’s some of your men waitin’ outside, Mr. Paxton,” he said, looking at Paxton with questioning eyes. “Are they lookin’ for you?”

Paxton went to the doorway and glanced out. “I’ll be going now,” he said without seeming to notice the four men who were standing between the cabin and the water’s edge.

Kirk turned suddenly from where he had been standing and following Paxton, cast his eyes about him. A vague suspicion arose in his mind. He stepped quickly towards Paxton and laid his hand heavily on his shoulder.

Paxton turned and gave him a vicious look. “Take your hands off me,” he commanded.

Kirk’s grip tightened. “What are these men doing here?” he asked.

“Young fellow, it’s none of your damn’ business,” Paxton snapped. “They’re not on your property.”

Suddenly from the bushes into which ran the trail to the Micmac, old man Dags emerged. Even at a distance Kirk could see that the old man was excited. When he saw Kirk he stopped suddenly.

“Come on, Kirk!” he called. “Get back to the creek!”

Paxton placed himself between Kirk and Dags. “Take a word of advice from me, Brander,” he said, “and stay where you are.”

Paxton’s men moved up from the shore of the lake and loitered near the trail. Their movements were casual and showed no outward indication that they were fulfilling any prearranged plan. But Kirk was taking no chances.

“I’m going down that trail, Paxton,” he said quietly. “Get your men out of my way.”

He swept Paxton to one side, observing as he did so that the attitude of the men standing before him had suddenly changed. Their movements plainly expressed their purpose. Kirk leaped to one side to avoid Paxton’s rush and seizing a double-bitted axe that stood against a log where John Mackay prepared his fuel, lifted it and turned to face them. For a moment only he paused and set himself for the rush. When they came at him he leaped towards them swinging the axe and shouting his warning. The suddenness of his attack and the fierceness with which he came down upon them was more than they could be expected to withstand. As he leaped first at one and then at another they fell back and left the trail clear before him.

Dropping the axe he ran towards Dags and together they hurried off down the trail. When they had come within a hundred yards of their own camp Dags spoke, his words coming hurriedly and brokenly as he struggled for breath.

“Get down to the cabin—Allen’s cabin,” he said. “She was up—Jule—came up here. They’re goin’ to get Tuck—there’s something down there—they’re goin’ to stop him—he can’t get through. She had to go back—Phil has her watched—get down.”

What Dags had tried to tell Kirk in his incoherent and excited manner Kirk himself verified a few minutes later. Hurrying through the woods, he heard men talking and when he emerged into the open space in which stood Jule Allen’s cabin, he realized that a deliberate plan had been worked out to make it impossible for Tuck Roberts to get through to the camp, provided he should make the attempt any time before midnight. If he did not arrive before midnight, it didn’t matter whether he came at all. But Paxton had done all in his power to provide against Tuck’s coming at the last moment and upsetting his hopes just when they seemed on the point of being realized.

He ran to the cabin, threw the door open suddenly and stepped inside. As he did so Phil Roche and Jule turned to face him. The look of surprise in Roche’s face changed suddenly to a scowl of anger. But Kirk’s eyes were upon Jule Allen’s face. There was pain there and pleading, and then, suddenly, defiance.

“Kirk!” she cried.

Roche turned on her with a look that commanded silence. Jule moved into a position where the table in the centre of the floor stood between her and Roche.

“I’ll speak if I wish,” she said, her eyes flashing defiantly at Roche. Then, turning to Kirk she continued. “They are going to stop Tuck Roberts—they are not going to let him come—something is happening—something that is terrible. Ruth has been here and has told me. But you mustn’t let them touch him— —for Ruth’s sake, Kirk, for Ruth’s sake!”

Kirk looked at Roche. “You can’t do that, Phil,” he said, going towards Jule and standing beside her.

Roche leaned across the table towards Kirk. “We’re goin’ to do it—and we’re doin’ it now,” he said.

“What’s the idea?” Kirk asked struggling to retain his self-control.

Roche's face darkened. "What's the idea?" he retorted. "You're the idea—you and him and your whole gang! You think you can get away with it all the time—you think no one will stop you. Well, I'll stop you! You've won—I've lost. Here's where we call a show-down, Brander."

Kirk was not the kind of man to hold a grudge. Roche's foul tactics in the dog Derby and his interference on behalf of Paxton's interests during the summer would have been sufficient cause for anger. But in these things, after all, Kirk had been victor. The suspicion, however, that Roche had been at least indirectly responsible for the death of Wally Lamont made his blood hot as he stood and faced him. And Roche was now carrying out his plans directed against Tuck Roberts. What those plans were he could only guess. Jule Allen's warning had made him wonder.

"But where does Tuck come into this?" he asked Roche.

Roche leaned closer across the table. "You might just as well get this straight now as later," he said. "Tuck Roberts is playin' into our hands. Tuck's wanted outside—wanted bad—an' they've got—"

"Wanted for what?" Kirk asked in bewildered fashion.

"Ask Willoughby," Roche replied, "he knows. What I've got to tell you is that if he tries comin' in here now an' spoilin' our plans, we're goin' to spoil some things for him."

For a moment Kirk was struck dumb. He turned to Jule with a look of appeal but she turned away and put her hands over her face. Suddenly the simple facts of the case came upon him in full force. Somewhere, in all probability, Tuck in his eagerness to reach the camp before it was too late, was at that moment hurrying into the trap that Paxton and Roche had set for him. Outside the cabin, waiting on the shores of the creek, were men of Paxton's gang and just across the creek, within his own province, Willoughby waited with the authority of the law behind him. For the moment he forgot the mission upon which Tuck had embarked. He forgot Henry Tyne and the Micmac. He forgot the vision he had had that afternoon, the vision of his own future. He thought only of the man that had been his friend. He turned from Jule and started for the open doorway. But Roche, anticipating his move, sprang ahead of him and throwing the door shut stood with his back against it.

"Get back, Brander," he commanded. "Here's where the game goes on without you."

Kirk recoiled, stepped back a couple of paces and looked at Roche. The look of quick anger left his face. In its place there came something dark, grim, resolute. This was not the Kirk Brander of the dog race and of the fight at the dock. It was not the Kirk Brander who had met Phil Roche on the water and had given battle in a canoe more for the sheer love of fighting and the sport of it than anything else. He was rather the man who had gazed upon the frozen form of Wally Lamonte and had gone almost mad from the sight. He raised himself to his full height and then crouched low as he regarded the face of the man who stood between him and the help he wanted to give Tuck Roberts.

“Roche,” he said between set teeth, “get back from that door.”

For reply Roche moved a step towards him and stood on the defensive. Kirk moved back a couple of paces until he stood beside Jule Allen.

“See him,” he said without looking at her. “That man killed Wally Lamonte.”

Roche’s face became vicious as he looked at Jule and then back again at Kirk. “That’s a lie,” he hissed.

But Kirk did not seem to hear the denial. “He left him on the trail without dogs,” he went on. “Isn’t that killing? He knows. Now he’s after Tuck.”

Roche came towards him sullenly.

“Back, Jule,” Kirk said sternly, “back out of the way.”

He put one hand out to push her away and for a moment he felt her hands close over his fingers.

“Kirk, Kirk,” she said in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

At the sound of her voice Roche sprang forward and Kirk stepped back quickly. With a sweep of his arms he cleared the table and a couple of chairs from the centre of the floor and turned with the same movement to meet Roche who was bearing down on him. As they closed suddenly with a rush, the door opened and Henry Tyne entered. A cry from Jule brought the old man to her side. In that one tense moment Kirk’s ears caught the sound of the girl’s voice and then—the sound of his old uncle’s voice calling his name. From then on he heard nothing, saw nothing but the man whose rushes he met with his own, knew nothing but the stern business he had in hand. Once in a moment’s pause he looked over Roche’s shoulder and saw Paxton’s form near the door. Already it was nearing sunset and the bulky

figure in the half dusk of the cabin's interior looked to Kirk like an evil ghost that had entered without sound or movement.

But the one glimpse he had of Paxton awakened the instinct of primitive hate. He tore into his antagonist with the reckless fury of a madman. Roche met him and borne back by the force of Kirk's rush seized him round the body and clung to him with the tenacity of one in despair. For several seconds they struck at close range, madly, almost blindly. When they broke from each other again, Roche seemed content to stand in his tracks while he struggled for breath. But Kirk was in no mood to allow the fight to lag. Gathering his remaining strength he sprang forward again with the full weight of his body behind the blow. This time Roche tried awkwardly to avoid the rush, then, finding it impossible to escape, seized Kirk once more in his arms and bore down. Under the force of the attack the two men lurched over the table where it stood against the wall and Kirk felt Roche's weight sag helplessly under him.

Realizing that it was over, Kirk was content to rest a moment, holding Roche on his back across the table. Roche made a last desperate struggle to rise, and then relaxed. He was beaten and he knew it. For a moment there was no sound but the labored breathing of the two men. Neither spoke a word. Suddenly a cry of warning from Jule and Henry Tyne caused Kirk to spring back quickly and look behind him. In the dim light of the cabin he saw Paxton rushing towards him. He had lifted a chair above his head and was almost on top of him before he realized what was happening. Instead of backing away he sprang towards Paxton and shot under his arms before he had time to bring the chair down. Paxton's breath issued in a kind of lengthened grunt. His arms fell about Kirk in a helpless embrace and the chair clattered to the floor. In his face, turned towards Roche, there was the appeal of a man in despair. But Roche, who had sat up the moment he was relieved of Kirk's weight had seen Paxton's move, remained where he was and replied to Paxton's appeal with a smile that was plainly expressive of contempt. Kirk slipped his toe around one of Paxton's ankles and with a vigorous push sent him sprawling on his back upon the floor in one corner of the room. Roche's smile was one almost of amusement. But Kirk, in the madness that possessed him, turned again to meet the rush he expected from Roche, and to meet it with a rush of his own that would bring the struggle definitely to an end. He did not see the look in Roche's face, or seeing it did not understand. He was fighting two ways now and Paxton's tactics had merely quickened his determination and heightened his fury. The two men stood a moment looking at each other. Then Roche found his voice.

"That'll do, Brander," he said thickly. "I'm not fightin' double."

Paxton had got to his feet and was giving free expression to his opinion of Roche in rounds of lurid profanity. Kirk backed away from Roche cautiously and then turned suddenly upon Paxton. Before the threat of another infuriated attack Paxton's self-control returned almost miraculously.

"Get out there and call your men off," Kirk demanded.

But Kirk was never to know how Paxton would have responded. The door burst suddenly open and against the waning light of the outside the figure of Marion Curtis appeared. She rushed towards Kirk and stood before him, her hands on his arm, unable to speak.

"Where's Tuck?" Kirk asked quickly.

"Quick, quick," she replied urging him towards the door. "They have taken him!"

Shouts of men without startled them and forgetting for the moment the struggle that had engrossed their attention within the cabin, all rushed together to the doorway following closely upon Kirk's heels. A shot sounded from the opposite shore of the creek. Then another—and a third. A canoe shot from the cover of an overhanging clump of willows and darted into the current. In the middle of the canoe sat Tuck Roberts. Behind him was Joe Bedard and in front, Ruth Mackay. A fourth shot sounded from the farther shore and Tuck crouched suddenly in the canoe as if he had been hit. All at once the canoe seemed to leap forward as it dropped downward into the main current and headed for the centre of the rapids. The frantic efforts of Joe Bedard were helpless against the power that drove them downward. The swirling current swept the canoe first to one side and then to the other but always madly forward and directly towards the spot where the water rounded over the rock-ledge and plunged below. Above the roaring of the rapids, the voices of the men on the shore shouted warning and for a moment there was neither prejudice nor hate among them; there was only hope that by some superhuman feat of skill or strength the rapids might be beaten and the canoe pass downward with its burden to the quiet level of the water below. Even Phil Roche, who had rushed with Kirk to the edge of the creek, muttered something under his breath that might have been taken for either an imprecation or a prayer and that probably partook of the nature of both.

As the bow of the canoe approached within a few feet of the critical point in the rapids, Bedard, by a frantic effort swung it into the very middle of the main current. Their only hope lay in keeping free from the rocks.

Then as it shot over the edge, and just before it dipped down again to take the water, he got almost to his feet, struck out and forward with his paddle to throw them clear of a boulder, settled back to give more balance to the canoe and, with the course open before them, sat with both hands gripping the gunwales and trusted to fortune for the rest.

A shout arose as the canoe passed what seemed to be the most dangerous point in the rapids and then suddenly swerved, almost stopped, took another drop downwards, stood for the thousandth part of a second with its bow in the air and the stern low, and then, without the slightest apparent warning, flopped over sidewise, and backwards like a great awkward fish sporting itself in the water. No word came from those in the canoe. On the shore there arose a cry almost of anguish as the men rushed downwards along the pathway and plunged into the stream to render what assistance they could to the three who had disappeared in the water.

CHAPTER XXV.

An hour later Kirk Brander bore the form of Ruth Mackay up the narrow pathway beside the rapids and into Jule Allen's cabin. The men gave way before him leaving the way open and unobstructed. With him was Joe Bedard who had got himself out unharmed and had stayed to help the others look for Ruth Mackay, who had not come to the surface again after she had been drawn under by the back-wash at the foot of the rapids. Within the cabin Jule Allen was busy dressing a wound in Tuck Roberts' shoulder where one of Willoughby's shots had found its mark. Kirk laid his burden on the bed in Jule's room and turned to speak to Marion Curtis who had followed him from the outer room.

"This is bad," he said gravely. "Has anyone gone for John Mackay?"

"Your uncle went a few minutes ago," Marion Curtis replied. "Is there no hope at all?"

Kirk shook his head. "We worked for three-quarters of an hour without the slightest result," he replied. "How's Tuck?"

"Jule is dressing his shoulder."

As she spoke Tuck himself entered the room, his face white and drawn. Silently he stood and looked down at the white face of Ruth Mackay. Then he turned away and went into the outer room of the cabin where he sat down on a bench and bowed his head.

Kirk turned away and looked at Marion Curtis. "It isn't worth all this," he said slowly.

Together they left the room and went out to wait for John Mackay and Henry Tyne to arrive. In Kirk's heart there burned a desire to get from Tuck an explanation of all that had happened but a glance at Tuck's face made that impossible. He followed Marion Curtis to the window and looked out towards the river where a group of men were still standing talking among themselves.

"We have lost out all around," Marion Curtis said in a voice that was meant only for Kirk's ears.

Kirk faced her suddenly. "You mean—you mean you didn't bring back anything?" he asked.

"Nothing that will help," she replied. "It will take more time. One can't perform miracles—and that's what I undertook when I went out."

"How much time?" Kirk asked.

"Two months at least—but we haven't even enough to pay for an extension of the option."

Kirk turned from the window. Jule Allen was entering the room where he had laid Ruth Mackay. Quietly he left Marion Curtis and walked to the door of the room. He paused and looked at Jule as she stood with her hand on the hair of the girl who had been her sole companion during the summer. Then as he stepped through the doorway and stood near the foot of the bed, she came to him and laid a hand on his arm silently. As he looked at her, the announcement of Marion Curtis' failure came to him with added significance.

"This looks like the end," he said quietly. "Marion — —"

"She has told me," Jule interrupted him.

Kirk turned from her a little and laid a hand gently on her shoulder. "I didn't think—I'd have to—to give it up," he said. "I don't want to leave it—I can't leave it—I can't go back there."

The outer door opened and John Mackay and Henry Tyne entered together. As the two older men came into the room Jule and Kirk withdrew and left them alone.

Taking his hat, Kirk went to the door and opened it. It was growing dark and there would be some things to do at the camp, where he had left Dags alone in charge of the work ever since he had gone to John Mackay's cabin early that afternoon. It seemed now that days had passed since that visit to John Mackay. Well, he had done what he could. The dream he had cherished secretly for weeks had been shattered. The future looked very dark and about him now was no order, no plan, nothing but confusion and cross purposes. With a word to Tuck to follow him, he put on his hat and went out.

When he had stepped out he saw a group of men standing between the cabin and the creek. As he looked at them Phil Roche drew away from the others and advanced towards him. Kirk sent Tuck along the trail and waited himself for Roche.

“Brander,” said Roche when he stood finally before Kirk, “this thing is over for me. I’m gettin’ out. An’ the reason ain’t you—an’ it ain’t her.” He nodded his head towards the cabin. “It’s the boss over there. This wouldn’t ‘a’ happened only—he’s a crook. He’s pulled all the crooked stuff that’s been done in this game. Now I’m gettin’ out. I’m goin’ in north for the winter an’ you won’t hear from me. I figure we both lost, Brander, when we came in on this. I lost, that’s sure—an’ you didn’t get anything out of it. So long.”

He waited a moment for Kirk to make some response but Kirk was thinking very hard and was silent. Only when Roche turned to go did he finally speak.

“Phil,” he said in a voice that was firm with resolution to see the whole affair through to the end, “who framed that fur-stealing on Tuck?”

Roche took a step towards him. “Brander,” he said, “that wasn’t my work. I don’t know who did that. But I do know that you’re makin’ a mistake in stickin’ to Tuck. He’s good enough just as he is but—Tuck’s got a record, Brander, an’ you can’t afford to keep him round.”

Kirk had heard enough about his friend, Tuck Roberts, to set him to wondering.

“What do you know about Tuck?” he asked quickly.

“Tuck’ll tell you himself, I reckon,” Roche replied. “He’s got no chance unless he gets out an’ he’s got to get out good and quick or he’ll not find the goin’ any too easy. If he’s goin’ my direction, tell him he’s welcome.”

Kirk was at a loss to understand Roche’s changed attitude.

“You’d help him get away?” he asked.

Roche sniffed impatiently. “What’s the use, Brander?” he replied. “This ain’t any repentance stuff I’m pullin’—not a little bit—but I’ve been in the wrong kind of a game. I don’t know how to play it with men like W. K. P. I might just as well admit I’m stuck but—I’ve had the experience an’—never again!”

Kirk felt, somehow, that Roche was sincere. One thing more, however, he wanted him to make clear. He stepped so close to Roche that their faces almost met.

“Who took Lamonte’s dogs, Phil?” he asked.

Roche's countenance fell slowly and he turned away. "I'm gettin' out, Brander," he said, "an' that—that's the real reason. I thought you knew that."

He walked away and Kirk stood watching him until he had disappeared in the dusk. His confession had affected Kirk strangely. Roche could have defended himself against the law. He could never have escaped the wrath of the men of the northland, however, had they come to know what he had done. That he should thus have thrown himself entirely on Kirk's mercy was an indication that he had completely surrendered. And as Kirk turned away he felt that he had some reason to feel grateful to Phil Roche. A man, after all, who can confess his wrongs and can sacrifice everything, as Roche was doing, because of them, was not beyond redemption. And Kirk knew that for Phil Roche to leave the place in which Jule Allen moved and never return to it was an atonement that few men would have made for the greatest sin they had ever committed.

He turned away and joined Tuck Roberts waiting for him in the shadows. And all the way back to the camp Kirk's mind struggled with what Phil Roche had told him. He would have asked Tuck to explain it all, to tell him the whole truth about his past life, but their four years together had taught him the value of a friendship that was taken on its own merits and no questions asked. He would wait until Tuck himself volunteered to speak.

An hour later Marion Curtis stood in the open doorway of the cabin and looked at the woods and the creek and the lake, all pale under the starlight. Jule Allen stood beside her. Behind them John Mackay and Henry Tyne sat together at the table. Their voices broke the silence only at long intervals and their words were little more than whisperings. In one corner Joe Bedard sat on the floor, his back against the wall.

Marion Curtis had told Jule the story of her own failure and the two were now under the deeper gloom that had fallen upon the place. Presently from the creek shore a shadow came towards the cabin. They both recognized Warren Paxton at once. Marion Curtis touched Jule lightly on the arm and whispered to her.

"Go in and close the door. I want to speak to him alone for a minute."

Jule withdrew and Marion stepped out. When the door was closed behind her she went directly towards Paxton.

"Good evening," he said in his usual nonchalant manner.

She returned his greeting and stood before him.

"It may be none of my business," she said, "but you are on your way to see John Mackay, aren't you?"

"I had that in mind," he admitted. "The occasion—"

"Not on business," she interrupted.

"That was not my main idea," he replied. "Of course—"

"Just a minute, Warren Paxton. I always knew you were thick-skinned. But this is going a little too far. You will not talk business with John Mackay to-night."

"I am making every allowance for the delicacies of the situation, Marion Curtis," he responded. "But you must realize—"

"I realize one thing just now," she put in again, "and that is that you will stay away altogether unless, for once, you are willing to act as I wish in the matter."

"I'm in no mood to have you interfere with what is entirely my own affair," Paxton blustered.

"I have moods, too, Warren Paxton," she reminded him. "Just now I don't want you in there. I'm not so sure that you would be very welcome anyhow."

"That's my affair—and I'm quite capable of looking after it myself."

He brushed roughly past her and strode towards the cabin. When he reached the door she spoke again.

"You are going to force me to do something very unpleasant," she warned him.

His answer was a grin that Marion Curtis could not see from where she stood in the darkness and he opened the door abruptly and went in. A few minutes later there came the sound of a footfall on the trail from the Micmac. In a moment the form of Kirk Brander moved out of the shadows. He had completed his work at the camp and was returning for Henry Tyne. When he came before the cabin he stopped suddenly and looked at Marion Curtis. She hastened towards him and he met her half way.

"Go on in," she said quickly. "Paxton has gone in and he's just fool enough now to cause trouble."

Together they went towards the cabin. Before entering, Marion Curtis laid a hand on Kirk's arm and he paused with his hand almost on the latch.

For a moment she debated something in her own mind without speaking. Then suddenly her manner changed and she led the way into the cabin.

What she had feared had already taken place except that Paxton had somehow or other managed the discussion in a way that permitted no apparent resentment on the part of John Mackay. He had taken his place at the table with Henry Tyne and the old prospector and was talking as pleasantly as if he had come to pay a friendly call. John Mackay was listening silently and Henry Tyne's head was bowed. Kirk and Marion moved quietly towards the table at which the three men were seated and stood above them.

"I have no wish to hurry matters," Paxton said drawing some papers from his pocket and placing them on the table before him, "but as business men we all understand, I think, just what the situation is. There are urgent matters outside awaiting our decision here and my men must leave in the morning."

He opened the papers and laid them before John Mackay with as little ostentation as possible. He apparently did not mean to offend. But the mere crackling of the paper as he smoothed it out on the table seemed out of place where all had been so silent before. John Mackay glanced at the papers a moment without touching them and in the deep silence Paxton's heavy breathing was the only audible sound as they waited. Marion Curtis seemed on the point of speaking but she admitted to herself that any word from her would only make the situation less tolerable. Henry Tyne sat low in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together nervously. Kirk looked long at his uncle and then fought with all his strength against the desire that arose within him to seize Paxton and throw him out.

Quietly and slowly John Mackay lifted the papers from the table and began reading them, his lips moving as he did so, but making no sound. When Paxton drew from the inner pocket of his coat a cheque made out and signed, Marion Curtis almost unconsciously leaned forward to glance at it. As she did so Jule Allen emerged from her room and coming forward quietly stood beside Marion Curtis and laid a hand on her arm. Marion felt the hand tremble a little and turned to look at the face of the girl beside her. But Jule's eyes were upon John Mackay.

"This represents the initial payment on the contract," Paxton said in a tone that was almost indifferent.

He placed the cheque on the table before John Mackay. Jule Allen withdrew her hand from the arm of Marion Curtis and leaving her side

walked quietly to the other side of the table and stood behind John Mackay. She watched him while he lifted the cheque in his fingers and looked at it. Then she took her hand from the pocket of her skirt and stepping close behind the old prospector held another piece of paper between him and the cheque he held in his hand.

John Mackay did not take the paper at first. He looked up at Jule Allen, question in his eyes.

“To extend the option,” she said simply.

Paxton started forward suddenly and began to question the value of the paper in Jule Allen’s hand.

“Mr. Mackay knows more about that than I do myself,” Jule corrected him. “It is his own money I am paying back to him—the money he paid me for the ‘White Squaw’.”

There was a long period of silence. Presently John Mackay took the cheque from Jule’s hand. He held the two cheques before him, one in either hand and laid both on the table. Slowly he picked up Paxton’s papers, folded them, placed Paxton’s cheque within them and handed them across the table to him. Without a word Paxton took the papers and thrust them into his pocket.

“How long will the extension last?” he asked as he got up and prepared to leave.

“That will be a matter we’ll have to decide later,” John Mackay replied. It was the only word he had spoken during the whole transaction.

When Paxton had gone out Marion Curtis left the group abruptly and followed him. Outside in the darkness she hurried after him as he strode off towards the creek where his canoe awaited him. When they were out of earshot of the cabin she spoke and Paxton turned to meet her.

“I warned you against going in there,” she said. “It was rotten form and it turned out bad business.”

Paxton was very angry. “I don’t require any comment on the affair from you just now,” he snapped. “It’s only a matter of a few weeks, anyhow. And in the meantime—much may happen. This isn’t over yet by a long, long way.”

Marion Curtis raised her hand quickly and smiled. “Warren Paxton,” she said, “it is over. Why not admit it?”

“It will be over when I pull up stakes—not till then,” he replied.

She looked at him for a moment without speaking. When he seemed on the point of going she took a step towards him. “Listen to me,” she said, “you talked business to-night when I didn’t want you to. Now, listen to me while I talk a little business to you.”

“Go ahead,” he retorted.

“You have fought me, Warren Paxton, with whatever means you found, foul or fair, for five years or more. I have lost often in those five years. But I’m not through yet. You may think you are in no way responsible for what has occurred here within the last few hours. They may not think so. But your methods are wrong. If it comes to that mine are wrong. I realize that more clearly just this moment than I ever did before. I know because—because I have lost again. You’ve lost—and you ought to have the sense to know there’s something wrong with your way of doing things.”

Paxton shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

“Don’t be foolish, Warren Paxton,” she said. “You and I have no real place here. I’m going to get out and I’m not coming back. I’m going to leave this life to those who want to live it. But for the sake of the game and some of the players in it I’m going to make sure of one thing before I leave. I’m going to make sure that you are going to pull out, too.”

Paxton stepped back from her and grunted his surprise.

“I’m talking business, Warren Paxton,” she persisted, “and for once you had better listen and take my advice, too, in the matter. You think you are going to stay round here and obstruct the work of this mine and wait the first opportunity to get control. Well, I tell you, you are not. It isn’t so much Henry Tyne that’s going to work this place. He’s in our class. The task is Kirk Brander’s—his and—and Jule Allen’s. You should have seen that long ago. I’d have seen it myself if I hadn’t been blind. Now we’re going to leave it to them. I’m going because there’s no place for me here. You’re going because it’s good business.”

“I’m quite capable of using my own judgment in matters concerning my business interests,” Paxton reminded her.

“You’re just wasting time,” she replied. “Perhaps you know—or maybe you haven’t heard that rumor connects your name with John Allen’s loss in the rapids on Rat Creek.”

Paxton drew himself up suddenly on the defensive.

“Whether you know that or not, you do know—and I know—what I took the trouble to find out as soon as the rumor reached me. You and I know that the Rat Creek affair was your doing.”

“I’m not concerned with any of your suspicions on anything, Marion Curtis,” Paxton declared, “but I do warn you to be careful what use you make of my name when you are airing your suspicions before others. You might be called upon to prove your case.”

Marion Curtis smiled.

“You amuse me—no, you annoy me,” she said impatiently. “It positively annoys me to think that you don’t know me any better after fighting me for five years. Listen to me. I never waste time on suspicions. And I never try bluffing where I’m really in earnest about anything. You know, even better than I do, what it would mean to you if it was suddenly discovered that John Allen’s equipment was lost because you paid a man to let a cable slip and send the whole thing down the rapids. You couldn’t get accident insurance for a week. Don’t let’s waste time on words, Warren Paxton. This isn’t the place for it. You and I are going to get out of here and that’s all there is to it.”

“I’ll not waste words,” Paxton replied. “I’m going to stick here—and you won’t move me.”

All the fight in Marion Curtis’ heart came into her eyes. She clenched her fists and lifted her head in the proud way Warren Paxton knew so well and feared, too.

“Then—by George—try it!” she challenged.

Paxton looked across the creek towards his camp. Sounds of men’s voices came to them, echoing in the silence of the woods on the creek shores. He listened a while and then turned and looked towards the cabin. As they stood there without speaking, the door of the cabin opened and Jule Allen came out followed by Kirk.

“Don’t you think you’d better be going?” Marion Curtis asked him.

He would have replied, for it was very plain that something was troubling him but as he was on the point of speaking, the forms of Kirk and Jule approached them from the cabin. Paxton checked himself, and, not knowing whether the situation demanded that he should go or stay, hesitated long enough for Kirk and Jule to come within a few feet of them. It was evident from the exclamation of surprise that came suddenly from Jule that

neither she nor Kirk had been aware of the two who were standing in the trail until they were almost upon them.

For a moment Kirk looked at Paxton and then at Marion Curtis.

“Are we intruding?” he asked.

Marion Curtis smiled. “I think not,” she replied. “Are they, Mr. Paxton?”

Paxton looked at them for a moment without replying. Then suddenly he turned on his heel. “Go to the devil!” he exploded pettishly and went off.

“The old man seems a little peevish,” Kirk remarked as they watched him go.

Both Jule and Kirk broke into laughter at Paxton’s dramatic leave-taking. Marion smiled a little as she dwelt upon the humor of the situation but somehow laughter was not for her. She was not so much older than these two and yet they seemed boy and girl beside her. She was conscious, too, of a certain irony in the words with which she reminded them of the lateness of the hour.

“It’s time you children were in bed,” she remarked when they had ceased laughing, and together the three turned back towards the cabin.

At the doorway Jule and Kirk paused and Marion Curtis passed in closing the door behind her. John Mackay was on his feet beside Henry Tyne who had risen to go back to camp as soon as Kirk returned. Marion’s entrance drew a glance from Henry Tyne but John Mackay was intent upon something else. In his hands he held the cheque which Jule Allen had given him. Slowly he tore it in two, placed the two halves together very deliberately and tore them again, and yet again. Then he let the small pieces flutter from his fingers to the floor.

“Good-night, Henry Tyne,” he said, offering his hand.

Henry Tyne took the hand and held it in a lingering grasp.

“Good-night, John Mackay,” he said unaffectedly and turning away put on his hat and walked slowly towards the door.

He bade good-night to Marion Curtis and going to the door, met Jule Allen who came in suddenly, her face glowing with youth but strangely serious. For a moment they regarded each other in silence. Then the old man put his arm about her, kissed her tenderly, and went out.

A few minutes later Kirk Brander and Henry Tyne entered their cabin. Dags was snoring peacefully in his bunk. Tuck Roberts was sitting where Kirk had left him scarcely an hour before, still smoking cigarettes. He moved slightly as Kirk and his uncle entered but spoke not a word as Henry Tyne, utterly weary from the experiences of the past twelve hours, prepared for bed. Kirk sat down in a chair and faced Tuck, and thus they waited without speaking until Henry Tyne's heavy breathing told them that he was asleep. Then they got up and went together to the cabin that did service as office and store-room.

There Tuck Roberts began the story that Kirk had never heard, the story that he had waited for with a suspense that he could hardly bear. Slowly Tuck reviewed the events of his life in the far south, a life that had had unfortunate beginnings and had grown steadily worse until, in a moment of madness, he had taken the life of another. And Kirk listened silently through the night hours until gray dawn appeared at the window.

When the story was told at last they sat a long time without speaking. In Kirk's mind was being fought the battle that many a man has fought for the sake of friendship. When he spoke at last, his words told how the battle had gone.

"We must get out of here, Tuck," he said suddenly and in a tone that was merely matter-of-fact.

Tuck looked at him and smiled a little. "What's the use of that, Kirk?" he protested. "They've got my trail again and they'll never lose it. Keene would follow me for twenty years—until he was done or I was."

They were silent again for a moment.

"There's even more to it than I've told you, too," Tuck said at last.

Kirk raised his head expectantly.

"If it hadn't been for Ruth," Tuck explained, "I'd be doing time now. She produced an alibi and—and—swore by it. But she knew—she knew I had a hand in it."

Kirk started to his feet in surprise. "Tuck," he exclaimed, "you don't mean the—the fur?"

Tuck nodded his head slowly.

Kirk came and stood over him. He was trembling from head to foot. "Then—by God, Tuck—I ought to—I ought to kill you for that!"

“That’s why I never told you,” Tuck replied. “But she—she knew—and she took her oath—swore we had been together that night putting the dogs a few miles over the course—and when I headed straight into the trap they set for me last night—she waited for me and—you know the rest. Not many of our pure-blood whites would do that for a man, Kirk. Don’t you see now that I can’t go—that I’ve got to stay and take my medicine. But I won’t stay here, Kirk. I’ll go out and meet it. Keene is on patrol now. When we hear of him coming—there’ll be plenty of time.”

He got to his feet and faced Kirk. For a moment the two men looked straight into each other’s eyes, their faces set hard, their brows knit, their mouths tight-drawn.

Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps without and then, Joe Bedard passed the window and came to the door. When Kirk turned quickly and opened the door for him, the half-breed hesitated a moment, looked at Kirk and then at Tuck Roberts.

“Tuck,” he said. “Keene—come now up trail.”

He nodded his head slowly, then lifted his chin towards the trail leading from Jule Allen’s cabin. Kirk looked out and saw in the early light the forms of two men coming towards the camp. One was Willoughby of the Saskatchewan force, the other, Keene of the Royal Canadian.

Kirk stepped back quickly and closed the door. Then, yielding to the impulse that rose suddenly within him, he seized a holster and belt from the wall, thrust it into Tuck’s hands and urged him towards the door.

“Hurry, Tuck,” he said, “you can make it. Up the trail to John Mackay’s cabin and across—”

“It won’t work, Kirk,” Tuck protested mildly.

The door flew open suddenly and Jule Allen rushed towards them, breathless and frightened, her hair about her shoulders and clad lightly in a loose wrap.

“Tuck, Tuck!” she cried. “They’re coming.” Then, when she saw that he was not moving, she turned to Kirk. “Tell him, Kirk—tell him to go—I can’t—I can’t stand—”

She put her hands to her face and Kirk put an arm about her shoulders to steady her. Tuck looked once at her and then at Kirk. They gripped hands silently.

“I’ll go on out,” he said and then, looking at Jule Allen, “I’ll be back in a minute. You two wait here.”

He went to the door, turned once for a last look at Kirk and Jule, and with the light of the east on his uplifted face strode away, past the window, and out of sight. For a long moment Kirk stood with his arm about the trembling form of the girl. On the table before him lay the belt and holster where Tuck had thrown them before he left. And in the dim light of the early morning Kirk saw that the holster was empty. He felt his throat tighten and his breath stop as he waited in an agony of suspense—waited—waited—then, three quick shots shattered the cold silence.

Jule sobbed, a great heart-breaking sob, and buried her face against his shoulder. Kirk drew her close to him, wondering vaguely about the great heart-hunger that had suddenly seized him. Then, fearing to move, he bowed his head until his lips touched the hair that was pressed to his shoulder.

“Tuck, Tuck,” he whispered hoarsely. “Oh, God—Tuck!”

And even as he spoke, the forms of Willoughby and Keene stood in the open doorway where only a few moments before had stood the living form of Tuck Roberts.

“Sorry, Kirk,” Keene said, “but he drew our fire and—we had to do it.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

Kirk Brander left work somewhat earlier than usual and went to his cabin. For half an hour or more he attended with extravagant care to such trifling matters as shaving, washing, and brushing down his stubborn mop of hair. When he looked critically at his reflection in the small mirror that hung above the wash-basin by the door, his approval was only half-hearted.

“Best I can do,” he commented and then hurried into his coat.

From the table he took a half dozen letters that had come in by the mail-carriers late the night before. Quickly he sorted them and picking out one from Marion Curtis, threw the others back upon the table.

Five minutes later he strode through the camp on the trail that led to Jule Allen’s cabin. As he passed the boiler-house the voice of old man Dags came to him from the entrance to the main shaft.

“Get back early, young fellow,” Dags called. “These late hours is playin’ hell with business.”

Kirk laughed to himself and hurried along the trail into the woods. It was already late October—a full two months since that tragic day in August. Much may happen in even less time but Kirk’s thoughts now were of the rare freshness in the air that already had a little of the crisp tang of autumn in it, and of the glory of simply being alive in such a place and at such a time.

Where the trail dipped a little towards the water and showed a little bay through an opening in the trees he paused a moment to look at the heavy flat leaves of the pond lilies lying on the water and riding over the ripples as gracefully as if they had been no more than dark green shadows on the surface. Suddenly a little whisking wind turned the water gray and flipped up the edges of the leaves. To Kirk’s mind it suggested the cold days that lay just ahead and he hurried away, his heart now warming in anticipation of the hot supper that awaited him in the cosy cabin of Jule Allen.

When, a minute later, he opened the door of the cabin and looked in Jule was not anywhere in sight.

“Hello!” he called.

From behind him came the clear note of a girl's laugh. Turning from the door he saw her standing on the top of the great rock above the rapids, her arms outstretched to the brisk breeze that was coming in from the lake. As he went towards her she ran down the path to meet him and almost threw herself laughing into his arms. They kissed each other in happy mood and together went back to the cabin.

They sat late at supper that night. The early autumn twilight prompted the lighting of a lamp that gave an added touch of cosiness to the place. Kirk was full of the latest developments on the property and the reports he had received by mail the night before from Marion Curtis and Henry Tyne.

"It's going to be even bigger than I dreamed," he said with full boyish enthusiasm. "We'll have to bring power here, enough power to work one of the biggest mines on this continent. We may have to go all the way to the Burntwood. Jove, it'll make Paxton's little old ideas look like a peep-show in a cigar-box alongside a three-ring circus. We'll have to put in a cofferdam and drain half the lake to work the new ore-body properly. It'll take a year or more for the government to build the railway in from The Pas—but that's settled. And we'll have a town of our own, Jule, with five thousand people. Jove, girl, there's a man-sized job right here that'll take a whole lifetime."

He got up as he spoke and going round to her side of the table, drew a chair close to hers and sat down. Under the great urge of the vision that challenged his imagination he put his arms about her.

"A man-sized job!" he repeated and kissed her almost roughly.

She pushed him back a little and looked at him.

"And the woman-sized job?" she asked him.

"Making a man—man's size," he smiled.

She got up and went to a small stand in one corner of the room. "I got a letter last night, too," she said.

When she came back to him and sat down she held an open page of a letter from Marion Curtis before him. She folded part of it back and held before his eyes a couple of lines that she indicated with her fingers. Kirk read them slowly—"Jule, dear, you do not know how rich you are. You are too young—and too happy. And you cannot understand how poor I am. But that's the way of the world—good luck to you, dear, and to you both."

Kirk was thoughtful for a moment. "Marion's a good old scout," he said finally with great seriousness. "Do you know something?"

Jule looked up at him as she folded the letter and laid it on the table.

“What?”

“I believe she had something to do with forcing Paxton to pull up stakes so suddenly and get out of the country,” Kirk suggested. “Something happened—something made him duck for cover. No man leaves what he left—the way he left it—unless he has a reason.”

“You’ll never know from Marion,” Jule replied, “unless she chooses to tell you.”

“Well,” Kirk commented quietly, “Marion doesn’t make many mistakes. If she chooses not — —”

“She has made one mistake,” Jule interrupted.

He looked at her expectantly.

“When she says I don’t know how rich I am,” she said and leaned towards him.

The long silence that followed was broken at last by the sound of voices from the creek.

“There they are!” Jule cried leaping up and running to the door.

Kirk was beside her as soon as she had thrown the door open and together they looked out into the gathering dusk. Two Indians were pulling the bows of two canoes up unto the shore. When the canoes were steady the figures of three men got out one after another and came towards the cabin.

The first was that of Henry Tyne who took Jule in his arms as she met him and kissed her, laughing, before he gave his hand to Kirk. Behind him came old John Mackay, hailing them heartily as he passed them lugging a pack towards the cabin. Last came the slight, dark-cloaked, energetic form of the venerable little father of the mission at Cumberland House.

“Nothing to do now but declare a holiday and invite the men to the feast,” Henry Tyne laughed as Kirk and Jule escorted the old missionary towards the cabin.

And when they had gone in and had closed the door behind them the old lobster that stood with arms outstretched above the rapids bowed his tufted head before a stiff night wind. And one that did not know might have thought his head was bowed because of the three mounds that lay side by side under the shelter of the lower branches. But in days to come he stood up

in all his sentinel dignity, the guardian of happy hearts that had found satisfaction in a great work and comfort in a great love.

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 *The Lobstick Trail* by Douglas Durkin]