

PENITENTIARY

POST

by

KATHRENE

and ROBERT

PINKERTON

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*“Phil did not doubt for a minute that Solomon Moses was dead . . . he
had been literally torn to pieces.”*

PENITENTIARY POST
BY
KATHRENE AND ROBERT PINKERTON



FRONTISPIECE
BY
RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
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PENITENTIARY POST

CHAPTER I

YOUTH

PHILIP BOYNTON had seen two white men in a year and a half. He had arrived at the Split Falls post of the Hudson's Bay Company on the last ice of the spring, having been rushed in by a wise old district manager who saw in Phil's apparently mutinous demeanour merely the expression of a need of something difficult to do.

That difficult task, the routing of a particularly ingenious and energetic opposition, had kept Phil from going out with the fur brigade in the summer. He did not regret his non-attendance at the gathering of the post-managers at district headquarters because he was too actively engaged in the consummation of a plot born of the devilishness of his own pent-up energy and enthusiasm.

As a result of this plot the too-ambitious Free trader had been glad to accept Phil's offer of protection from a mysteriously enraged band of Indians and even more glad to get out of the country at the Hudson's Bay Company's expense. Phil charged the item to "extension of trade," making a place for it in his report blank. He was particularly pleased with himself, for he had given a new twist to an old trick of fur land, that land where two hundred years of precedent have developed a code of ethics entirely in keeping with the harshness and the loneliness of the land itself.

This little business out of the way and the Indians properly impressed with the reprehensibleness of their disaffection, Phil began to look forward to the annual New Year's gathering of post-managers. His was the most distant post of the district and he would have to start December first. The last week in November an epidemic of hydrophobia wiped out all the dogs in his yard and he was forced to settle down to an eventless and mailless winter.

The winter passed, as those dark, cold, interminable winters have passed with countless managers of isolated Hudson's Bay Company posts for more than two hundred years, and summer brought with it the triumphant journey of the fur-laden brigade. For Phil's three York boats would be laden as never before in the history of the post.

Only Phil did not go out with the brigade. The Company's flag was not run to the top of the flagpole to indicate the departure of the post-manager. Instead, that ruler of a little wilderness kingdom lay flat on his back in the dwelling house, alternately listening to the excited chatter of the thirty Indian boatmen and cursing the broken leg that lay motionless beneath the weight of a dunnage bag filled with sand.

It was fall when the brigade returned. Phil was walking without even a limp, due to the skill of his Indian servant, and was the first to greet the boatmen and receive the precious bag with a whole year's mail. He gave hurried, excited directions for the unloading, dealt out a regale for the crew with a scandalously reckless hand for so distant a post, and then ran with a schoolboy's skip and jump to his office to read the package of letters.

It was not so imposing a bundle as one might expect. Few of us receive more personal letters than we write, and when mail days are usually six months apart our correspondence decreases proportionately. The first few years of separation are exceptions, but Phil had seen a dozen North-country winters, and the world had grown very far away.

Nevertheless, he tossed aside impatiently the long, official envelopes of the Company, tearing open only those with the postmark of a small English city. He glanced hastily at each, commenting excitedly as he did so.

"Mother's all over her attack of the grippe."

(Mother had fully recovered eighteen months before.)

"Well, think of that! Little Sis to be married!"

(Sis was already the mother of a boy.)

"The governor's bought a motor-car. Getting to be a regular sport."

(The governor had forgotten that car completely, in the possession of a new marvel.)

"Uncle Philip's still alive. Some folks never die."

(Uncle Philip's unaccountable will, by which he had left his relatives only a pound each, had been in court a year.)

After Phil had skimmed the cream from the news, he began systematically to read the letters from home. It was dark when he had finished and at last became aware of his housekeeper's insistent calls to supper. After he had eaten he was busy in the trading shop until late, paying

off the boatmen, dealing out goods to them and arranging with the Indian hunters for their annual fall debt.

The next day and the next it was the same. All the Indians had gathered at the post to wait for the York boats and were eager to be off to their hunting-grounds. At the end of the third day the last was gone and Phil remembered the official mail for the first time.

There wasn't much of it, and some of it was old. He glanced through it rapidly, scorning the suggestions contained, eager for some word of commendation because of his triumph over the Freetrader the year before. The signature of the second letter brought him up with a start. The wise old district manager was no longer in charge. His successor was a stranger.

Phil read more carefully, returning to a letter he had only glanced at. The kindly, almost paternal, note of the former district manager was lacking. He had understood men, the peculiar type of men bred by the isolation and the work and the distorting influences of loneliness. He made a personal matter of a purely business communication, and he was loved for it.

If his successor understood the North country and its people he did not show it. Because Phil had never heard of him he jumped at the conclusion that the new incumbent was an upstart, officious, conscious of his position, unreasonable in his demands. As a matter of fact, it was a simple business communication, a letter of instruction untempered by a note of friendliness. It was the letter of a stranger to a stranger, not of a man to a man, and Phil's indignation increased rapidly as he ran through three more of the same sort.

"Unbusinesslike conduct of posts!" he exclaimed when he had finished. "And I've just sent in more fur than this post ever sent before."

He picked out another irritating clause.

"'Unsystematic nature of the reports'! What more does he want? I told everything in the reports a man could tell. And he got the fur and he knows how much goods I received."

Then a new one caught his eye.

There has been a failure to observe certain well-known regulations and to heed more recent requests as to the nature of reports desired. More strict adherence to business methods is expected in the future.

Phil stared at the letter in open-mouth astonishment. But he did not explode again. Instead came a sullen resentment, a sombre acerbity, that grew as the days passed and he read and reread the obnoxious communications.

There was no one at Split Falls post with whom Phil could discuss what he considered a legitimate cause for righteous indignation. That was the trouble. For a year and a half there had been no one with whom he could discuss anything of importance. In those eighteen months he had seen only two white men, the Freetrader whose departure had been so hurried, and a geological survey man who had seen no reason why he should neglect science to entertain a lonely representative of the Hudson's Bay Company. The mere fact that Phil had saved him from starvation did not obligate geology.

The quick winter came and found the post-manager moody and irritable. Had he not wiped out the opposition that had threatened to ruin the Company's business in that region? Had he not done so after two others had failed to stay the downward trend of the fur receipts? Had he not just sent out the largest shipment of fur the post had ever known? Then why should he be censured, picked out as an object of castigation? Why should his success be ignored and fault found with a lot of rot to which no one had ever paid any attention?

The first of November Phil's indignation culminated in a sudden resolve. He would go down to the district office and ask this upstart what he meant by writing him such a letter. He would show this officious superior that Phil Boynton at least would not submit to unmerited criticism. He'd run down and tell him to his face what he thought of him.

And Phil did run down. With one dog-team to haul him, another for the supplies, and two Indians to break trail, drive, make camp, and cook, he left his fort to the care of an Indian servant and set off through five hundred miles of wilderness to have five minutes of satisfactory conversation.

The journey was difficult, even for the North country. There were days when they made only ten miles, and there were other days when they sat huddled about a small fire while the blizzard roared through the stunted spruce that offered only a semblance of protection. Snow seemed to fall continually, and the work of breaking trail was so difficult that even the Indians remarked upon it.

But at last Phil arrived at the fort which was the headquarters of his district. As the dogs, now on a hard trail, raced across the ice toward the

distant building, Phil forgot the object of his journey in the prospect of again communing with his fellows. Old times at the fort, where he had served the first two years of his apprenticeship, were recalled, and as he dashed up to the office he became again the careless, happy, companionable chap who had made himself a favourite throughout a district as large as all Europe.

Perhaps it was the absence of familiar faces as he stepped out of the cariole that brought back to him the real reason for his journey. The indignation of months returned, and he strode into the office, black and grimy from the smoke of many campfires, still dressed in his skins and furs, his hair about his shoulders and his face long unshaven.

At first Phil believed the office was empty. Then he saw a head appear above a roll-top desk in a corner and the next instant a man stepped out into the middle of the room. He wore well-pressed clothes, a linen collar and shirt, a neatly knotted tie, and on his feet were shoes that were actually polished.

These things alone did not confirm Phil in his hatred for one whom he knew instantly to be the new district manager. Many of the Company's men at the larger posts dress as men do in cities, and in some places the formalities of a court are maintained. But this man's cool, businesslike appearance stamped him at once as someone alien to the North country. He belonged a thousand miles farther south was all Phil thought as he slipped the otter-trimmed hood of his skin coat back from his head.

"I'm Boynton, from Split Falls," he said. "I want to see Mr. Borthwick."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Boynton," was the reply. "I'm Mr. Borthwick."

Phil ignored the outstretched hand, but before he could speak Borthwick continued:

"New Year's is three weeks off. Some trouble at Split Rock post?"

"Split Rock post was never in better shape," replied Phil, hotly. "And I know New Year's is three weeks off. Here's why I came down," and he shoved a soiled and crumpled letter toward the district manager.

Borthwick shot a quick, questioning look at him and then coolly unfolded the letter. He glanced at it an instant.

"Well?"

"Well!" repeated Phil, "Isn't that enough?"

"I hardly understand," and Borthwick again glanced at the letter. "Perhaps there is some mistake. This is only one of my letters to you."

"Of course it's only one of your letters to me. But I want to know what you mean by it."

For the third time Borthwick looked over the letter, this time reading it from end to end.

"I still fail to see," he finally said, "why this should necessitate a trip of a thousand miles at the Company's expense when the regular channels of communication are still open."

"You don't!"

"Certainly not. In this letter I have merely made certain suggestions and called your attention to certain things. All are matters of routine, things pertaining to the Company's business. There is absolutely no excuse for your putting the Company to the expense of a trip down here on so trivial a matter."

"Trivial!"

Phil, his indignation culminating in a blind rage, could only repeat the word and stare at the cool, precise individual before him. His hands were clenched and he raised himself on to his toes several times as though preparing for a spring.

And then suddenly he realized that Borthwick never could understand, that he was not of the North country, that he did not know North country men, never could know them. To him the effort and work of a year alone, the isolation and the lonesomeness, the total absence of the things that go to make up the normal life of a man, all meant nothing. To this man he, Phil Boynton, was not a human being but merely the manager of Split Rock post, the bloodless, nerveless, soulless automaton sent there to transact the Company's business.

Phil contrasted him with the wise old district manager he had succeeded, the man who knew men and their limitations, who had been one of them and one of the Company, working for its interests, loyal to it and its spirit and its precedents, putting it first but, like the Company, not necessarily leaving them out of consideration.

Phil became suddenly cool and collected.

"You are the new manager of this district?" he asked, quietly.

“Yes.”

“All right. I’m through. I quit. I’ve worked for the Company more than ten years, ever since I was a kid. I’ve always given it the best I had, and I’ve always felt that the Company did the same with me. But if you are district manager, if they are going to bring penny-counters from the shops in Winnipeg and put them in charge up here, I’m through.”

“You mean you have deserted your post and come down here on a mythical pretext.”

“Not another word out of you!” roared Phil. “You’re lucky to get off with no more than I’ve given you. If the Company is making district managers out of men like you, I’m through with the Company.”

He turned and walked out of the door before Borthwick could reply. His Indians had already put their teams in the dog yard and were eating supper. Phil made his way across to Bachelors’ Hall, only to be disappointed again by finding its sole occupants were two apprentice clerks fresh from Scotland. A few inquiries revealed that there was no one at the post whom he had ever seen.

In complete disgust he prepared for supper. He could look forward only to a second meeting with Borthwick at meal time. As he changed his clothes he thought of cutting things to say, of remarks about the fort as it had been in the good old days.

But at the table Borthwick was uncommunicative, though polite. He seemed clothed in an air so impersonal that Phil, though boiling inwardly, found no opening, even for the subtle comments to which alone he had recourse because of the presence of Mrs. Borthwick. The apprentice clerks seemed to be afraid to talk. Mrs. Borthwick had a lofty idea of the position she occupied as mistress of the district and under the suffocating weight of the formality she imposed, Phil worried through his first really civilized meal in a year and a half.

He was glad to escape at the end and rushed immediately to the employees’ quarters. As a result of five minutes of voluble Cree he was in a cariole hours before daylight the next morning and when Borthwick awakened was on his way to Winnipeg, one team hauling him as he lay back comfortably in his robes, while another followed with the provisions for the journey.

It was five hundred miles to Winnipeg, and Phil covered the distance in only slightly less time than that from Split Rock to the headquarters post. He

went at once to the Company's offices, turned in his written resignation and drew his accumulated salary, seven hundred and fifty dollars. Neither the commissioner nor the assistant commissioner was there and Phil left at once without an explanation of why, after a dozen years, he chose to leave the service of the Company of Gentlemen Adventurers Trading into Hudson Bay.

That night, in clean, well-pressed clothes, his hair cut, and his face shaved, Phil Boynton thrust his legs beneath a hotel table for the first time in five years. He had been in Winnipeg before, on his first and only leave of absence, and, though he was a complete stranger, he felt as if he were at home. The lights, the music, the smart linen and silverware on the table, the chatter throughout the big room, the odours of food and drink, all were as wine to unaccustomed lips. Merely being there intoxicated him. The long years of loneliness were forgotten, the hatred for Borthwick was as if it had never been, and he abandoned himself to the present.

Consequently, when a man was seated at his table five minutes later, the attention of the entire dining room was attracted by Phil's outburst.

"Jerry McGill!" he cried in a voice heard in the lobby. "Sit down. Stand up and shake again. Have a drink. This meal's on me. Where'd you come from? What Providence sent you here? I thought you were way down the Mackenzie."

McGill was no less boisterous in his greetings and it was five minutes before they became joint possessors of the information that Philip Boynton, late of the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, and Jerry McGill, corporal of the Royal Northwest Mounted, were really sitting together at a table in Winnipeg, tasting of the delights of civilization after long absence; that each was having dinner on the other and that they were to make a night of it.

The number of years a man has lived counts for nothing after a long stay in the wilderness. The return of civilization levels ages, brings all down to the exuberant period of youth. The sailor after a long voyage, the cowboy after months on the range, the lumberjack after a winter in the woods, each on his return to town becomes a boy, a wild, heedless, shouting, intoxicated boy.

Phil Boynton and Jerry McGill, freed of the fetters of interminable distances, celebrated their reunion as only men of the Northland can celebrate. What happened would be difficult to say. Phil himself could not remember when he wakened in the middle of the next forenoon. He was in his room in the hotel. Beside him, fully dressed, lay Corporal McGill. It was

all unfamiliar, but this strange bedfellow brought back dim recollections, the second or third of which caused Phil to spring from bed with utter disregard for his head.

A quick search of his pockets revealed one roll of bills. He counted these anxiously, and then again. There was only four hundred and fifty dollars when there should have been seven hundred and fifty dollars, less what little he had probably spent the night before.

“Jerry!” he cried, shaking the policeman. “Jerry! Wake up! Where’s my money? I didn’t spend all of that!”

But Jerry refused to waken and Phil again searched his pockets. This time he found in the inside breast-pocket of his coat a long white envelope. In bewilderment he opened it and drew out a piece of green paper which unfolded with queer little jerks like a child’s toy until it stretched to the floor.

Still bewildered, Phil examined it.

“Winnipeg to St. Paul.”

“St. Paul to Chicago.”

“Chicago to Montreal.”

“Montreal to Liverpool.”

And then it began reading backward.

“Liverpool to Montreal.”

“Montreal to Chicago.”

He did not have to go farther. He knew what he had done. He was now the possessor of a round-trip ticket home, which had cost something more than two hundred dollars.

Still stunned by his discovery, Phil sat down on the edge of the bed. Home! Mother! The governor and his new motor-car! It was twelve years since he had seen them. He had been a boy, eighteen years old, when he had said good-bye and, despite their protests, sailed away to British America. He would like to see them.

He shaved, dressed, packed his bag and then turned to the bed.

“Wake up!” he called as he shook the snoring man. “Wake up, Jerry!”

The policeman turned over and stared with puzzled eyes.

“I’m going home!” Phil cried, excitedly. “So long!”

McGill swung his feet to the floor and stared at the other.

“Where?” he asked, suspiciously.

“Home. England.”

“Oh!” and he rolled on to the bed again. “You’ll be back soon. I went once. They’re sending me up to the Bay and I’ll see you there inside of a year.”

CHAPTER II

TWO BARS ON THE MAGNET

PHIL did go back. For a month his visit home was pure delight. He was the returned wanderer, the eldest son, and he reveled in the adoration of mother and sister, the unbending of his father, and the unaccustomed creature comforts of civilization.

Then the change came. After the excitement of his return had vanished he saw that he was no longer an Englishman, that he no longer was in accord with venerable English ideas. Thrown into a strange environment when at a plastic age, he had shed English thoughts and habits for those of a wide, raw land. As a result, he was a stranger to his family, and his family to him. He was bored. They were scandalized. Conditions became strained. He wished he hadn't come.

One day Phil suddenly realized the cause of an insidious restlessness. It was the North country, the only thing he cared about, the only place he knew, and where he in turn could be understood. He took a train to London and dropped in at the offices of the Hudson's Bay Company.

There is no other corporation in the world like it. Its servants, as they are still called in the contracts, are its children, and no mother was ever more forgiving of errant or vagrant offspring. Phil was welcomed with open arms, reëmployed, and sent out on the first ship of the summer. His joy was so great he could even laugh at the relief with which his father and mother greeted his announcement that he was returning to Canada.

Captain Hargraft had commanded the ship on Phil's previous voyage. He remembered him, as he remembered all the young English and Scotch boys he had taken into Hudson Bay, and Phil received a cordial greeting.

"We have a lady passenger this trip," said the captain after they had talked for a while on the bridge. "Company is sending her over to be governess for some post-manager's children near the Bay."

"English girl?" asked Phil.

“Yes, and a beauty. One of the big, tall, blonde kind. I’ll fix you at the first table.”

“Captain, let me mess with the crew. Serve my meals in my room. Starve me, if necessary. But don’t put me at the same table with an English girl. I’m fed up on them. I haven’t seen anything else for months. If there’s a breed girl from Norway House on board, all right. I’d like to talk to one. But not the English kind.”

“Wait,” was all the captain said.

Even Phil’s first voyage, when he had hardly slept nights, so impatient was he to see the land of his dreams, failed to compare with the ecstasy of his second in company with Joyce Plummer. It was not that he had been starved by his twelve years in the wilderness. It was not that he turned in relief to this thoroughly delightful young woman after the boredom of his family’s friends. It was because she was in reality the girl he had dreamed of at solitary posts.

Joyce Plummer so nearly fitted his picture that Phil could not look at her for several days without a somewhat superstitious feeling of awe. From the first meal he worshipped, generally silently, always with a conscious effort to conceal what he felt must be a most evident adoration.

It was inevitable that Joyce Plummer had been worshipped thus before. Perhaps that was the reason she appeared to be so unconscious of Phil’s attitude toward her, a fact which, unknown to him, added to her charm. She had that faculty of ignoring the differences of sex, of understanding things wholly within men’s sphere. She not only showed interest in men’s activities but could talk intelligently about them.

But the real bond between them, the common ground upon which they met from the beginning, was her almost masculine appreciation of the romantic aspects of life in the country to which she was going.

“How did you happen to enter the Hudson’s Bay service?” she asked him that first afternoon.

“Ballantyne,” he answered, and instantly her face lit up.

“Me, too!” she cried. “‘Ungava,’ ‘Hudson Bay,’ ‘The Young Fur Traders.’ I’ve read every word of them several times.”

“They’ve started more young fellows in the service than any other one thing.”

“And are you disappointed afterward?”

“In a way, but you don’t think of that. Something else takes its place, I guess. It’s just as you would expect, after reading Ballantyne, and yet it’s altogether different. I don’t think any one can tell exactly what it is about the North country that draws him so. The Lord knows there are enough things about it to drive a man away. And yet they don’t. He sticks, or he goes back, and he’s always unhappy when he’s away and always glad to get back again.”

“That’s just as I knew it would be,” she exclaimed. “I knew some things would be different. But I knew that the real things, the love for the land, would come.”

“It’s strange your knowing that before you go. I didn’t know it and yet it is what will really come true.”

“But perhaps that’s because you didn’t come from a Hudson’s Bay family,” answered the girl, quickly. “It must be that the love of the land was born in me. All my life it has been there. My father and my uncle were Hudson’s Bay men. Only my father could not stay in the country. My mother was not strong enough to go there and so he had to come back to England. And always for her sake he hid his wish to return. But as a child I realized it. And when we were alone we used to talk of the country. I think his longing was born in me. That is why, when my mother died and there was no one to keep me in England, I was so glad to go out there as a governess. It seems almost that I must live that life for both father and myself.”

Joyce’s words explained to Phil her surprising knowledge of the Company, its methods and the lives of its servants. For, while her understanding enthusiasm for the purely masculine activities of the Hudson’s Bay Company had charmed him, it had also puzzled. He would have been quick to feel a forced interest or a desire for the bizarre. He would have been repelled by either pretense or hoydenism. But the naturalness and sincerity of her ardour compelled acceptance and won him completely.

Phil was so thoroughly entranced that he gave no thought to anything else. Had his captivation been less complete he would have given some consideration to the future, would have wondered at least into what the present was leading him. But never a thought of it entered his head until he was suddenly brought face to face with reality by an entirely innocent question from Miss Plummer.

“What will you do when you get to the Bay?”

“Whatever they have for me to do,” he said when he recovered from the shock. “Sent out to some post if there is a vacancy. There probably is one or

the London office wouldn't have sent me to the Savant Lake district."

"And will your resignation and return to the service result in your being given an unimportant post? Sort of a punishment for running away?"

"They do punish that way sometimes. But the chances are that the Savant Lake district manager will not know anything about that, or care. He'll put me where he needs me, or where he wants to put me."

"But he will surely know what you did at Split Falls before you left, of how you drove out the opposition."

Phil flushed at this interpretation of a story he had told with an entirely different purpose. To him the flight of the Freetrader had been only amusing in the retrospect.

"A man's reputation does help, at times, but mine's rather mixed, I'm afraid," he laughed.

His face instantly became serious. A thought had come to him that sobered him completely. Joyce saw the quick change in his expression.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I just happened to think of the posts in the district. I've never been in it, but of course I've heard all about it and know of every post."

"And there is one that—one that isn't popular?"

"'Not popular' hardly expresses it."

He shivered and looked out over the sea.

"There is a little post I'd forgotten about," he said at last. "And maybe they'll send me there, though I never did anything to deserve such a fate, even by quitting. It's out of the world entirely. It's way out past the rim of things, even for the North country. It's the most desolate, horrible spot you could imagine, more desolate and more horrible than you can dream of until you have seen a little of the land you're going to. Most posts are lonely, but there is something about this one that has given it a reputation from Rigolet to McPherson. It's called Penitentiary Post, and that is what it has been, a prison for the man in charge, a punishment worse than any one in the service has ever deserved. I think they keep it open just for that purpose."

Something in the tense tone of the fur trader caused Joyce to look at him apprehensively.

"But they wouldn't send you there!" she protested.

Phil smiled. Her confidence did relieve his apprehension, but he knew that he was never destined for Penitentiary Post. His talks in the London office had given him an insight into his value to the Company. The successful meeting of competition, the adaptation to new conditions of the fur trade, these demanded men other than those of the old school, men not too thoroughly steeped in the old methods of transacting a business that is not like any other business in the world.

“No,” he said with a confident smile, “I’ll never be sent to Penitentiary Post.”

CHAPTER III

PHIL GETS HIS POST

THE journey of Joyce Plummer and Philip Boynton did not end with the sea voyage. Each was bound for Savant House, which meant a canoe trip of four hundred miles together.

From the day the girl had landed from the ship, which anchored many miles out from shore, she had been enthralled with her surroundings, with the things she saw and the many things she heard. For the first time, too, Phil was denied what he had come to consider his exclusive prerogative. There were several men at the great depot on the bay where the ship unloaded, men who had not seen a white woman for so long that the fair beauty of Joyce Plummer fairly stunned them.

But only for a moment. Post-managers and district managers vied with each other for the privilege of showing her about, of sitting next to her at mealtimes, of answering the questions with which she was so abundantly supplied. Phil was simply shoved to one side by that irresistible force that draws lonely men to a woman. He had to be content with only those crumbs Joyce managed to toss his way.

He was not entirely idle in the three days preceding their journey to Savant House, however. There was much news of the North country to listen to, news that told him of the past and of what the future might bring.

First, he learned that his disaffection of the winter before had not been an isolated case. Others had been aroused by the cold, unfamiliarly businesslike letters of Borthwick and the entire district had been in such a ferment that a new manager was on his way to succeed him.

Secondly, the district to which Phil was going was in charge of John Wickson. Claude Osborne was post-manager at Savant House and it was his children that were to be tutored by Miss Plummer.

Thirdly, Wickson would undoubtedly be glad to know he was to have Phil in his district. He had two vacancies, or would make one of them because of the inroads of a company of Freetraders.

“Everybody knows what you did at Split Rock,” Phil was told, “and Wickson will shove you out to try your hand with these other fellows at Long Point. He’s had two men in there in the last two years and the fur receipts have kept on falling. Old-timers, both of them, and they couldn’t make headway against the opposition. And Wickson isn’t the kind that stands for any one else getting the fur. It’s a good post, and you’ll like it there.”

Consequently, when at last he and Joyce started up-river by canoe, each paddled by two Indians, Phil was once more in the seventh heaven of the sea voyage. Again he was alone with her, and he was going to a good post, one not so far from Savant House but that he could run down two or three times a year. The future held only entrancing dreams.

It was Phil’s nature to live in the present, the present and the immediate future. His North-country training as well as the boyishness that had persisted into manhood was responsible for this. He liked his work. Despite his resignation of the winter before, he had that loyalty to the Company so characteristic of its servants. Men older in the service than he, brooding through a long solitude, had done similar things. It was only an instance of the independence of post-managers fostered by the Company itself to meet its peculiar conditions.

And it was in the present and the immediate future that Phil lived on the canoe journey with Joyce. On the ship she had been looking forward to the things of which she had talked and dreamed. No boy entering the service could have been more enraptured over the prospect of seeing his first post on the Bay, his first Indians, his first canoes and York boats. Nor was there any of the sightseer in her attitude. She wished rather to become at once of the country, to take part in all its activities. She was not content to sit in the canoe and be paddled but insisted on plying a blade. She amused the Indians by carrying a small pack across portages. She even dabbled in the cooking and marvelled at Phil’s refusal to do anything at all.

“Why, it’s jolly, this sort of thing!” she exclaimed one day. “I don’t see how you can sit and do nothing. I should think you would be bored to death, lying back there on all those blankets in the canoe.”

“I always read when I’m travelling alone.”

She looked at him rather scornfully.

“Don’t you ever do anything?”

“Oh, I did at first. But one gets tired of it, and then it’s not quite the thing, you know.”

Frankly she surveyed his big, husky body.

“You should do it to keep fit,” she declared. “And then it’s such sport, far better than cricket or tennis. Why isn’t it the thing?”

“Well, you see,” and Phil nodded toward the Indians who were eating their noon meal nearer the river bank, “we have to let these people think that we’re a little too good for work. They are the workers. We are the masters, and we can’t ever let them forget it. It’s always been the custom, and it’s policy to keep it up.”

“I believe you’re only lazy,” she said. “But I’m going to learn to paddle and snowshoe and drive dogs and do all the rest.”

The memory of that journey never dimmed for Phil. It seemed for a time that it would never end, this floating side by side with the girl he loved in the land he loved. It seemed to be too perfect, but he never looked forward to the end, to the time, now near, when he would be compelled to leave her for six months of loneliness unbroken by even a letter.

Their complete isolation, that feeling of being in a little world of their own, had its effect on Joyce, too. Without speaking of it directly, without voicing thoughts which had become common, they drifted into a union which seemed sweeter because it was wordless. They were, in reality, two children in the wilderness, failing to comprehend anything except the present, unable to understand why all life should not be a pleasant drifting side by side.

All Savant House turned out to greet the new governess. John Wickson’s reception of Phil was hardly less cordial, and though nothing was said, the young man knew at once to what post he would be sent. Unconsciously too, he had begun to assume an air of proprietorship toward Joyce. He could be magnanimous now when others demanded her attention. Secretly it pleased him, and that first afternoon was spent in the office of the district manager while the Osbornes monopolized Miss Plummer.

Wickson made no reference to Phil’s resignation and reënlistment in the service of the Company. With just a mention of Split Rock post he let the young man know that he had heard of his work there. He emphasized too, the necessity of more active methods in handling the opposition, gave his views on the subject and drew some from Phil. When supper-time came the

best of relations had been established between them and again Phil thought of the pleasant year ahead of him.

He saw Joyce for a few minutes before supper.

For the first time her eyes were not laughing or lighted by a boundless interest in the country to which she had come.

“Did you hear about the poor fellow who was brought in here last week?” she asked.

“No. Who was it?”

“The post-manager from Fort Dease. He was taken out on the way to Winnipeg only yesterday.”

“Hurt, was he?”

“No, so much worse than that. He’s mad, Phil, mad as a March hare.”

“Couldn’t stand the lonesomeness, eh?”

“That’s what they say. Why, Phil, such a thing must be terrible, being driven mad by the solitude.”

She looked at him apprehensively, but he only laughed at the fear in her eyes.

“Something the matter with a man when he can’t stand a year of that sort of a thing,” he assured her. “Men have been doing it for more than two hundred years, in these little out-of-the-way posts.”

“But, Phil, this man said it was something else; spirits, evil spirits, a ‘weeteego,’ he called it.”

Phil refused to consider the matter seriously.

“The ‘weeteego’ came afterward, I guess,” he said. “That’s the Cree for ‘evil spirit,’ sort of a cannibal affair with them. After he went off his nut he probably thought he saw one.”

“But when he was here he raved all the time about it. Mrs. Osborne says she doesn’t think the man was mad but that he was simply scared out of his senses by something, though the men didn’t take any more stock in it than you do. But she says he told about this ‘weeteego’ trying to get into his room at night and of hearing all sorts of strange sounds when he knew no one else was within many miles of him. She said it made her shiver, the stories he told her, and she says she is sure that he is not insane and that there is something back of what he said.”

“Just the loneliness,” Phil insisted. “He couldn’t stand it, though the poor beggar probably had a hard time of it at Fort Dease.”

“Why Fort Dease more than any other post?”

“Don’t you remember my telling you of it, way out past the rim of things, the most desolate place imaginable, off there on the Bay? And you got some idea of how desolate a Bay post may be.”

“Not Penitentiary Post!”

“That’s the name it generally goes by, though Fort Dease is the official name.”

“And he was sent there, sent to be punished! Why, Phil, such a thing is terrible.”

“Oh, perhaps he was only an apprentice clerk given his first tryout. Good thing he found out early that he couldn’t stand the life.”

The call for supper came and the entire white population of the fort gathered at the table. Wickson, who had been busy with some mail Phil had brought from the Bay, was seated opposite Joyce Plummer. They had met in the afternoon but only for a moment and the district manager seemed to realize for the first time that she had arrived.

He was fascinated from the start, and he made no attempt to conceal the fact. He spoke to no one else at the table, and he gave Joyce scant opportunity to divide her attention. At first the girl was flattered by this tribute of the despot of an empire. She found in it a promise of agreeable companions through the year, for she had been won at once by the Osborne family.

But Joyce Plummer had never before seen a man like John Wickson. The men she had met had become of the North. He had always been of that land. Unlike so many of the Company’s servants, he had not been brought from England or Scotland to serve his five years as an apprentice clerk and grow up in the service. His father and his father’s father had been Company men, had died in its service in the North country. Wickson had been brought up in it, had never known anything else.

He had been born before confederation, just before that time when the Hudson’s Bay Company had given up its ancient charter rights to the new Dominion of Canada. He had been brought up in the atmosphere of the old régime, among men who had never known any power, any law, except that

of the Company. He came of the days when post-managers were still called factors or traders from force of habit, and when district managers were chief factors with the power of a Muscovite ruler.

It was in those times with its supreme authority over half a continent, with its semi-military system of conducting its business, with its isolation and its mystery and its aloofness, that the Company established customs and precedents, bred a peculiar type of men and still managed, with all its autocracy, to give the world its first and greatest example of industrial welfare work.

Wickson was thoroughly of the old days in habits, training, thought, and actions. He was big physically, about forty-two years old, thoroughly tanned, a cat on his feet despite his size. He had lived completely in the North and of it, knew the forest like an Indian, could out-drive a half-breed with dogs, and wield as skilful a paddle as a Cree. In this he was different from the men imported from England. His vitality had been too rampant to permit physical indolence, and his skill and endurance had been great enough to win from the Indians more respect than had he merely posed as a ruler.

Naturally there was something untamed about Wickson. He had been associated with men of education and even culture. He had been known through a great wilderness for his thirst for books, and the long winters in many posts had given him abundant time for study. He had investigated with a scientific as well as a business interest the various tribes of Indians with which he had come in contact, and he had contributed several monographs to a London ethnological magazine.

Yet he continued to be much of a savage. Long association with savage folk, a lifetime of ceaseless struggle with a savage wilderness, these had their first effect upon him and the deepest. He had never known a restraining influence except his devotion to the Company, and in his work his very lack of restraint had brought success and promotion.

Through it all Wickson had remained very much aloof. He had few friends, no intimates. Men feared him, were repelled by his coldness and his hardness, by his singleness of purpose, by his blunt, uncontrolled speech. He did not try to, or could not, hide his contempt or his lack of interest in them. To the people of the North who knew him, Wickson had remained an enigma. He was respected for what he had accomplished, feared for what he might say, sometimes laughed at when a thousand safe miles separated him from the mockers.

Wickson had seen women before. He had seen the wives of post-managers and district managers. He had been "out" several times, once to England. But for the first time in his life he found in a woman something he had never known existed.

It was not Joyce Plummer's beauty alone. It was not the lure of fair hair after a lifetime of the Indian's black. It was not the tall, well-formed figure that differed so strikingly from those of the mothers of post children and from the squat, broad-backed, straight-lined bodies of Indian women. It was not alone the eyes which seemed so alive and so eager.

It was, rather, the very soul of the girl herself as it sought expression in every line, every feature, every light in her eyes, every full tone of her rich voice. It was rather that which was suggested than that which was apparent, the potentiality of a nature that had already broken the bounds of home and precedent and tradition. Joyce Plummer really stood at the threshold of a new life. Perfectly genuine and sincere, eager for the unexpected, unprepared for disillusionment, in love with life and with this new phase of it to which she had looked forward for so long, she was impatient for the future.

Adding to her charm, and to her disarmament, was her boyish enthusiasm for the life upon which she was just entering. Like a boy, she had made heroes of every servant of the Hudson's Bay Company, from the lowliest trapper to the oldest post-manager. Like a boy, she looked forward to canoeing and shooting and to the long, cold winter with its romantic dog-teams and skin-clad people.

To Philip Boynton these things had come imperceptibly. Daily he had found something new that appealed to him, and nightly he had pondered over it. Yet at the end he was unable to describe or explain one thing that drew him to her.

John Wickson was not half through his meal before he understood her perfectly. Almost instantly, though unfamiliar with women like her, he had assayed and appraised and probed, and his mind had done it coolly, calmly, thoroughly, while the fire in his heart was mounting to a white heat.

But if he probed coolly he probed openly. He did not seek to hide the new light that came to his eyes, and when they arose at the end of the meal every one at the table knew it except Joyce herself.

To Mrs. Osborne alone did it bring alarm. Knowing men of the North better, understanding Wickson's type, and, more than anything else, having read instantly the relation that already existed between Joyce and Phil, she

trembled at the thought of what might happen. It was not that she feared the sincerity of the district manager's motives, but she did dread what the power and the resistless energy and the very savagery of the man might bring. To her it spelled only unhappiness.

Phil felt nothing of jealousy or resentment, nothing of fear. Rather he was amused at this spectacle of bruin and the beauty, for as such he had instantly pictured them. In the weeks he had spent with Joyce he had not only come to accept the future but the loyalty of the girl. Though the real relations between them had been wordless, to him a bond had been signed.

Instinctively the two drew together as the party rose from the table and went into the living room. Their eyes met in a perfect understanding. Their heads were bent and a whispered pleasantry passed between them.

Mrs. Osborne directly in front, saw Wickson stare for a moment. She saw the light in his eyes, a light that flared to incandescence as he turned swiftly and strode on. Straight across the room he went until he was before his accustomed seat in a big chair by the table. But he did not sit down. For a moment he stood watching Phil and Joyce as they chatted in the doorway.

"Boynton," the district manager broke in upon them. "Come over to the office with me."

Phil, startled, turned from Joyce. Every one was looking at him. Every one was silent, tense, expectant. He saw for the first time the expression on Wickson's face. Just a little puzzled, but a smile still parting his lips, he glanced again about the room.

"Certainly," he answered. "Whenever you say," and he turned to Joyce as she stood in the doorway.

"Now!" snapped Wickson.

He walked quickly across the room and out into the hall. Even the slamming of the outer door did not arouse the group in the living room. Phil, startled again by the district manager's tone, glanced up to find Mr. and Mrs. Osborne and the two apprentice clerks still looking at him.

If he grasped the situation he did not show it. Quite pleasantly and naturally he excused himself and went out. A minute later he found Wickson seated at his desk in the office across the stockade.

"You're going to Fort Dease, Boynton," the district manager began at once. "Be ready to start to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER IV

THE CHALLENGE

“**T**HERE isn’t any opposition there!” Phil exclaimed.

He had been so confident of getting Long Point post, of having an opportunity to show again what he could do, his only explanation of this action was that a rival had unexpectedly chosen the isolated post for attack.

“No,” Wickson replied, with ostensible significance. “There is no opposition at Fort Dease.”

There was defiance, a challenge, in his eyes and bearing as he spoke. For a moment Phil returned the stare.

“I see,” he said, quietly. “It’s still Penitentiary Post.”

“It’s a post that needs a manager at once, and you start to-morrow morning,” snapped Wickson.

Phil did not reply. Quite coolly, a little contemptuously, he studied his superior. It irritated Wickson, and again he burst out:

“No Split Rock business this winter, either, Boynton! I won’t have a post in my district left without any one to handle it.”

“I understand you perfectly,” Phil said, quietly. “It would never do to leave Fort Dease unprotected.”

Because of the peculiar condition of affairs at Fort Dease, it was seldom visited by the Indians except in the summer, and it was known throughout the fur land as the post where there was practically no work to do for nine months in the year.

But the irony of Phil’s statement did not anger Wickson further. The district manager realized the mistake he had made in not hiding his real reasons for sending an efficient man to an unimportant post.

“You’ll have your hands full out there,” he said in his usual tone. “Some Indian or other started conjuring or saw a weeteego. The whole band is

stirred up and needs calming down.”

But he did not deceive Phil, nor was the story of panicky Indians accepted as the truth.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll be ready to start in two days.”

“You start to-morrow morning!” Wickson commanded.

Still as cool as before, Phil stared straight into his superior’s eyes.

“I think we understand each other perfectly,” he said. “I’ll be ready to start in two days.”

He arose at once and walked out. Wickson watched him go without a word.

The young man who left the office was not the same who had entered it less than five minutes before. The careless, thoughtless, heedless boyishness was gone. Adolescence had been shed as if it had been what in reality it was—a cloak long outgrown but which still fitted admirably.

The garment which took its place was even more comfortable, however. The big, tall, well-proportioned body had a better swing, a more confident carriage. The stride was quickened. The shoulders were set purposefully. The chin was at a new angle. A certain laughing light was gone from the eyes. Tightened muscles at the back of the jaw gave the cheeks an appearance of having suddenly flattened.

Wickson, as he watched from his office window, caught something of this, but not much. He only smiled confidently as he saw Phil crossing to the dwelling house and turned back to his desk. Patience is one of the great lessons the Northland teaches, and the district manager had learned them all. What were two days, he thought, against the three hundred and sixty-five to follow?

Joyce Plummer, however, read all that Wickson had missed, and while it brought its first flash of joy, she knew instantly that something serious, possibly tragic, had caused the change.

She was alone in the living room when he entered. Mrs. Osborne had dragged her husband away to tell him what she had read where he had been bewildered, and the two apprentice clerks, oppressed by the suspense-charged air, had retired to the bachelor quarters.

“What is it?” Joyce demanded as Phil stood smiling at her.

“Nothing at all,” he insisted.

"But there is something. I know it. Everyone knew it. What did he do?"

"He wanted me to start for my post to-morrow morning, and I merely told him I wouldn't be ready for two days."

"But why should he be in such a hurry? Long Point isn't far."

She flushed and then added, quickly:

"Mrs. Osborne told me."

"Long Point isn't my post, I'm afraid," Phil said as lightly as he could. "Wickson has someone else for it."

"Not Long Point!" Joyce cried, in bewilderment. "Why, he told Mr. Osborne he would send you there, not an hour after we arrived to-day. They all say you're just the man for it. Where will you go?"

"Fort Dease."

"You! Penitentiary Post!"

She stared at him in growing terror. Not for an instant did she doubt her senses. Things that had passed unnoticed flashed back with their true significance. Wickson's attentions at dinner, the sudden, curt command at the end of the meal, the strained silence that had followed the departure of the two for the office, each suddenly revealed its true significance.

"You! Penitentiary Post!" she repeated in a whisper.

Phil laughed. He had to laugh. It was the only thing he could do. In that short walk across the stockade from the office he had steeled himself not to speak to this girl of his love for her. He had determined to go away without a word, to wait until he had something besides a desolate hovel in a desolate land to offer her. He had suddenly realized that his love must find expression in success on his part before he could make it known. He had been brought up with a jerk by what he saw was his own unfitness. In such a land, with such a girl, it must be a man who offers himself, not a boy.

It was this thing that had changed Phil so completely, which had stiffened and hardened him, had made him realize his manhood and what it entailed. For the first time in his life he had found himself confronted with a responsibility. For the first time he knew that time is separated into three divisions whereas he had recognized only one. The present suddenly became dependent upon the future.

And so Phil laughed. Had he not laughed he would have swept her into his arms. He would have kissed the fear from her eyes. He would have

whispered endearments into the ears he had just shocked with his announcement.

“It seems,” he smiled, “that my services are not quite so valuable as I had thought.”

But Joyce’s expression did not change. She seemed not to have heard what he said.

“I can’t forgive myself, Phil,” she exclaimed. “I’m to blame for it all. It’s my fault. I’d give anything if I could undo it, and you could have what you deserve.”

Again he laughed, though this time there was a strain of joy in it that he could not down.

“Nonsense!” he protested. “I’m being punished for my little huff at Split Rock. Wickson and Borthwick are probably friends, and of course Borthwick hasn’t forgiven me as I started the revolt that cost him his district.”

“It’s my fault,” she repeated, dully.

“You’re mistaken entirely,” Phil declared, emphatically. “Wickson has just received word that the Indians have been all worked up by some conjuring business and may leave the district. He wants me to get out there as soon as possible and quiet them down.”

“But Wickson doesn’t believe those stories that have come from Fort Dease. He told Mr. Osborne so. He said this poor fellow had only become deranged because he couldn’t stand the solitude. He doesn’t think there is trouble there.”

“Perhaps he has had later advices. I think so, from what he said.”

“But Mrs. Osborne told me no other word had been received from Fort Dease since the first of last winter.”

“You’re not accustomed to fort rumours and don’t know how to discount them,” laughed Phil. “People have nothing to do but let their imaginations run riot.”

But Joyce was stubborn, stubborn with the assurance that she was right. And she was face to face with the North country, the land of terrific distances, of wordless winters, of fear-breeding uncertainty. She knew why Phil was being sent to this distant, desolate spot. She knew there would be no word from him for a year. The story of the former manager, brought out a

babbling idiot, was still fresh and haunting. Her canoe journey had given her a glimpse of the grim, forbidding nature of the North, of its silent, oppressive malevolence.

Fort Dease—Penitentiary Post—had become the incarnation of all that was mysterious and repellent in a land that mystified and repelled. To Joyce it had come to typify the wide, lifeless, sullen wastes, the dark, ominous, courage-gnawing winters, the hunger and the cold and the loneliness which only the North can cause. To her, too, it was the fount of all that was dim and uncertain and shadowy. It was the source of terrors and terrifying things.

She was suddenly overwhelmed with the dread of it. She forgot where she was, forgot that Phil had never spoken a word of love, forgot everything except the one fact that he was going to this place where anything might happen.

“Phil, Phil!” she cried. “You can’t go there!”

She stepped closer, grasped his coat with both hands, her face turned just beneath his. Her eyes pleaded, told of her fear, but they made known also the love which prompted her action.

For a moment Phil stood resolute, fighting his desire and the weakness that had seized him. Then as a torrent that will not be denied by the strongest barrier man can build, his longing overcame all else, and he threw his arms around her.

“Sweetheart!” he whispered in a strange, husky voice.

For a time they clung to each other. They did not speak. They did not even think. Fort Dease, the future, nothing mattered. Wickson was forgotten, the separation they faced, the uncertainty of everything. Love had gripped them, had filled their hearts and their minds.

Joyce was the first to speak.

“I’ll be brave,” she whispered. “But, dear, I don’t want you to go.”

“It’s only for a year,” he assured her. “I’ll ask for a transfer from this district next summer, and when we go we’ll go together.”

“But this year! Fort Dease!”

“I don’t dread that in the least. I’ve been through worse than Penitentiary Post.”

“But there is something the matter, something terrible there.”

“Just imagination. Spirits don’t visit Fort Dease any more than they haunt Trafalgar Square. Only, dear, I don’t like to leave you here.”

“Don’t worry about me!” Joyce exclaimed, fiercely. “I know what you mean. But nothing can happen. I’m yours, dearest, only yours.”

Two days later Phil left Savant House for Fort Dease. Two Indians were to paddle him to a post two hundred miles to the east. There, two more would take him another hundred miles to an outpost, where another relay of canoemen would take him on to Fort Dease. In this way each pair of paddlers would have time to return before the first ice of winter should catch them.

For Phil it was unlike any other journey he had ever taken in the Northland. He had books, but he did not read as the men drove the canoe upstream or across lakes. For hours at a time he would lie back on his blankets. Usually only rosy dreams came, but always there was present a dread of what the year might bring, a dread of Wickson.

He had not meant to speak to Joyce. He was a little ashamed of himself for having given way to a sudden impulse. He felt that he had had no right to speak. His future was uncertain. He was in debt to the Company for half a year’s salary. For years he might be shunted about from one remote post to another. He really had nothing to offer, and he had no right to ask Joyce to share the uncertainty of his future.

Phil spent one night only at his first stopping-place. Lowry, the post-manager, tried to induce him to remain at least a week.

“Wickson will never know,” he urged. “He’s a fox to find out everything that goes on in his district, but what if he does?”

But Phil had determined to go on as quickly as possible. A week before he would have remained two weeks, taking his chances on getting to Fort Dease before ice stopped the canoe. Now, in his suddenly awakened manhood, he was intent only on reaching his work. He intended to conduct the business of his post as though it were the most important in the district instead of the least important in fur land. He would not leave Wickson a loophole for complaint or reprimand. Henceforth his record was to be irreproachable, one that would compel attention. Something other than loyalty to the Company was forcing him now.

Phil’s dread of Wickson, or, rather, of what Wickson might do, drove him to discreet inquiries, however. Lowry knew the district manager well

and was a willing talker.

“It’s Company first with him, always,” he said. “He’s worse than an old-timer because his father and his grandfather were old-timers. He’s as much of this country as any Indian. The Company’s regulations are the only Bible he knows. I suppose it takes generations to breed the supreme devotion to the H. B. C. that Wickson has.”

“It’s too bad it doesn’t breed brains as well!” Phil exploded, despite himself.

Lowry laughed.

“Think you’re too good for Penitentiary Post, eh? Well, I’ll tell you, Boynton. You started something last winter and Wickson probably thinks it’s his duty to let you down for it. No, Wickson would send his own brother to Dease if he thought he should be sent there. There’s only one thing I ever expect to see upset Wickson and that’s a woman. It never has yet. He has never had the time, or the opportunity. Probably never happened to think of them.

“But he’s that kind. I don’t mean he’d be a devil with women. There’s a queer streak in Wickson. He’s pretty much of a savage and hard and reckless. He’d be square with them. No caveman about him if he does lack varnish. But he’d be invincible, too. I’d like to watch him. I know what his methods would be.”

Early the next morning Phil went on, two new Indians paddling him. The two who returned to Savant House carried a long letter to Joyce. It was the third Phil had written after Lowry had gone to bed. He could not keep his fear of Wickson from the first two.

That same morning Joyce had been romping about the stockade with the Osborne children. At last the older ones had run off with some Indian youngsters, leaving the little girl with their teacher. Joyce had sat in the shade of the dwelling house, telling stories, until the kiddy went to sleep in her arms. Fearful of awakening it, she sat there in silence near the open living-room window.

After a time she heard Mrs. Osborne enter the room and sit down at her sewing table. A few minutes later Osborne joined her.

“I guess there’s something in that Fort Dease business after all,” he began at once. “I was talking this morning with old Joe. He’s pretty sensible

about all this Indian conjuring business and the weeteego nonsense and he says he's sure there's something behind the stories those Fort Dease Indians told while they were here. He says it's something more than imagination, and something more than spirits, that drove the post-manager out of his head. If he believed like the other Indians, he told me, he'd think it was a weeteego, but he says a weeteego seldom leaves tracks, and whatever has been haunting Fort Dease left a trail unlike anything ever seen before."

CHAPTER V

PENITENTIARY POST

FORT DEASE stands on the farther edge of the newest, rawest land on the globe. The rare geologists who have seen it call it “juvenile,” “immature.” The few white men who visit it never willingly return.

Only yesterday, as the earth measures time, this land lay under the sea. Only last night it rose above the surface, bare, flat, brine-dripping, sodden. To-day it stands as the last reminder of what an unspeakably repellent place our earth was an astral month ago.

Bordering an empty inland sea more than three times as large as all the Great Lakes combined, it vies with the waste of water in emptiness but bows to it in diversity. The sea is a thing of many moods, raging, inviting, restless, uncertain. The land is unchangeably sullen, unimaginably dreary. It only broods.

It is empty of every living thing. In the same latitude as the latest world garden in the West, it lies barren and void. As far as the eye can see from the shore there are only marshes and gravel stretches, desolate plains of coarse grass and sedge. When the tide goes out it leaves a great, ugly expanse of boulder-strewn mud.

Far back from the inland sea little trees began a fight which they seem to have abandoned as soon as they had lifted their heads high enough to know what had given them birth. Stunted, unnatural spruce and larch, they serve only to add to the desolate aspect.

A few ptarmigan live in the low shelter of this puny forest. Otherwise, except on its western and southern borders, the land is too inhospitable even for those animals which thrive a thousand miles nearer the Arctic.

No Indians live in it. One hundred miles back from the inland ocean they struggled through an uncertain winter, always facing starvation, always dependent upon the two or three forts such as Dease. Without the Hudson's Bay Company the land would be absolutely tenantless, and even its efforts seem pitifully weak in the dreary, desolate dawn of an azoic waste.

Rivers thread this land, rough, raw, rushing streams that have scarred the surface with their newly cut banks of clay. They wander in places, as if seeking a river's natural heritage, a valley, only to mingle with the tide at last without ever having attained individuality.

The streams, the forest, the marshes, the flat shore, the ugly tide wastes, all contribute to the monotony and the rawness and the horrible emptiness. It is not a land God forgot or shunned. It is a land He never saw.

Into the centre of it came Philip Boynton. He had not seen it before, but he had seen others nearly as bad, and it did not oppress him. There were other things of more importance in Phil's life than his physical surroundings, other things that demanded all his free moments, and luckily for him there was little time for brooding over the dreariness that came from within.

More than forty Indian hunters and their families were camped about the fort, nearly one hundred and fifty in all, and each dependent upon Phil and the Company for the means of living through the winter. They were silent, sullen, restless, as men might be when they face famine and the quick winter. It was long past the usual time of departure for their hunting-grounds far back from the sea, and they were anxious to be away before the ice caught them.

Supplies for Fort Dease were brought down the coast in a sailboat from Fort Berens, whence they had been sent by the same method from the great depot beyond. It is the duty of the Fort Dease manager to make this annual, precarious trip to Fort Berens but Phil's predecessor had not been able to do so and the work had been done by the Fort Berens manager. He had supervised the transportation, had seen that the goods were stored properly and then had departed, leaving a half-breed, Sandy Thunder, in charge.

Sandy, who had long been the manager's sole servant at Fort Dease, had instructions to wait until a certain time for the arrival of a new manager from Savant House. If he had not arrived, Sandy was to fit out the hunters and send them off to their districts.

Phil arrived two days before this specified time and of necessity he plunged at once into the work of outfitting the Indians. He had little leisure to study his hunters, either while he traded with them or through that cold record of the Indian's character, the fort journal. This is so kept that each succeeding manager may learn how reliable each hunter is, how industrious, and how much debt he should be granted.

But, before he passed a pound of supplies over the counter, Phil performed that duty of all managers to themselves in isolated posts. He

selected several months' provisions for two, measuring generously, and set them aside, to be placed in a cache away from the buildings. Hudson's Bay Company men reduce so far as possible the chance of being left to starve as a result of fire.

In three days the last of the Indians had received his debt. Phil worked so hard and so rapidly that he did not realize the unusual speed with which they left the fort. He rushed them through so quickly that he had no time for gossip, that greatest source of a post-manager's information as to conditions in his territory. He was too busy even to notice the uneasiness of the men, the nervous manner of the women, or the frightened, shifting glances of the children.

With Sandy to assist him, he worked from early in the morning until late at night, and even from the half-breed he failed to obtain a hint as to the state of mind of his hunters. He knew only that they had far to travel and that time was short. Each must track his load up swift rivers, pushing through matted willows on the banks, and even then many might not reach their hunting-grounds before the ice barred their highways.

The morning of the fourth day Phil had his first opportunity to inspect the place that was to be his home for a year. The fort was built at the mouth of Cut-Bank River. The stream ran twenty feet below the buildings, which were set on the dead level of all the country.

Over the land as over the sea the view was unobstructed, without change. Southeast and northwest the shore stretched interminably, monotonously. Twice each day it thrust itself far out in pursuit of the receding tide, only to retreat as often. Back of the shore was the same unchangeable view, a country perfectly flat, perfectly bare except for the coarse grass and sedge. Still farther back, at the limit of vision, was a thin, black line, the beginning of the stunted timber.

The buildings, as at most posts since the stockade became unnecessary, were inclosed in the usual picket fence. They did not differ from those of any small post except in size, a fact readily explained by one sweep of the eye around the treeless horizon. It had been necessary to bring the building timber more than one hundred miles down the Cut-Bank in rafts, and logs were too valuable to be wasted.

There was a dwelling house, a small, square, one-story building made of logs and sheathed outside with whipsawed siding. There were the trading shop, the warehouse, and the servants' house. Outside the fence stood the

inevitable Indian house. Back of the trading shop was the dog yard, and that was all.

Inside the fence and out the ground was packed hard in dry weather and a mess of sticky clay in wet. Grass grew in patches. Paths led here and there, paths that dwindled out despondently in the bog.

Phil's house was divided into four rooms. The front door opened upon a hall which led back to the kitchen. The other corner at the rear was occupied by the dining room. In the front of the hall, doors opened into Phil's bedroom on the left and the living room on the right.

Sandy Thunder slept in the kitchen. The servants' house had long been unoccupied. Sandy had been the only servant, and, with the manager, had constituted the sole population. He did the cooking, the chores, and the few odd jobs necessary. Generally he sat beside his cook stove and smoked a pipe for hours at a time.

"Well, Sandy," Phil said the first night they were alone together and the half-breed was serving his supper, "the hunters have gone and mighty glad they seemed to get away, too. It isn't going to freeze hard for a couple of weeks, is it?"

"Most often next month, early," Sandy answered.

"I thought so. But an Indian always wants to be certain. Anyhow, they can't kick about being late. They'll make it, but you would have thought it was going to freeze to-morrow the way they got out as soon as they received their debt."

"It not the ice that makes them hurry. It the weeteego."

"Nonsense!" Phil was about to exclaim, but a quick look told him that Sandy believed implicitly in the evil spirit.

"I'll have to look into the weeteego business," he said, soberly. "The Company can't have its hunters driven away. I'll take care of this thing before the Indians come back again."

Sandy glanced uneasily at his master. Phil had spoken confidently, and many white men had powers Indians could not attain, especially Company men.

"This is a bad weeteego," he offered. "He travel like the wind. To-day he be here. To-morrow he be way off."

“Do you really believe there is a weeteego, Sandy?”

“Me know it,” was the ready, confident reply.

“You haven’t seen him?”

“Me hear him.”

“Sure it wasn’t the wind?”

“The wind no make noise like a gun.”

“But an Indian might have fired the gun.”

“Over there,” and Sandy swept his arm toward the great bog to the south, “no Indian ever go. Last fall after hunters are all gone, just at dark, me hear gun over there. That the weeteego.”

It was only a confirmation that the man had been misled by his imagination, but Phil had always been interested in this strange superstition common to northern Indians and he saw in it not only a chance to accomplish something worth while in the interests of the Company but entertainment as well.

“But, Sandy,” he protested, “how can a weeteego shoot a real gun that makes a real noise?”

“A weeteego he do anything,” was the solemn reply.

“But you haven’t heard anything except this gun?”

“That man here last year, you no see him go out?” Sandy countered.

“No, he left Savant House before I got there.”

“He see the weeteego.”

Phil kept a straight countenance with difficulty.

“Where?” he asked.

“In this house. The weeteego open the door to his room and look in. Not once but many times. That man he sleep with a gun beside him all the time.”

“What do you do, Sandy?”

“Me lock the door with the bar and keep a knife always sharp. But the weeteego never come near me. Only the other room.”

“Well, get the supper on the table, Sandy, and I’ll think over this business. I’ve got some bad medicine for weeteegos.”

But Phil didn't think over the weeteego business. It didn't bother him any more than a child's stories of ghosts would have given him the creeps. After supper he sat in the living room, trying to read. But always a face appeared on each page, a face that grew in distinctness until the type was blotted out, and at last he laid down the book.

Outside a cold, raw fall storm was on. Rain pelted against the building and fell in sheets from the eaves. The wind, unobstructed for scores and scores of miles, rattled loose boards in the siding and seemed at times strong enough to lift the house and hurl it into the river. Mingled with it was the noise of the surf on the beach.

At last Phil went to bed. Joyce and Wickson and what Lowry had told him of the district manager, these were far more important than Indian superstitions, and he dropped off to sleep without another thought of the weeteego.

He wakened early. Sandy evidently was not up. So Phil lay in bed as had long been his custom. There is no reason why lonely post-managers should keep energetic hours. At last he heard his servant rattling the stove lids and moving about in the preparation of the morning meal. When he judged that it was about ready he got up and dressed.

Still lazily, for he had all winter in which to do what little work lay before him, Phil went out after breakfast and strolled down the shore past the Indian house. The sky had cleared and the sun was an hour out of the sea.

He was watching the sun, the only pleasant thing to be seen in all the desolate vastness about him, and it was not until he splashed into a puddle that he saw where he was going.

His course had taken him into the bare, smooth spot where the Indians had camped, just beyond the Indian house. And as he looked at the ground he stopped, startled. Before him moulded firmly, clearly, unmistakably, in the mud, was the print of a human foot. Not moccasined nor shod in any skin or rubber, but bare, naked, with little ridges where the soft clay had pressed up between the toes.

For a moment Phil stared at the track. Then he followed it on across the camping grounds until it was lost in the bog beyond. He returned, backtracking, and found that the maker of the prints had come from the Indian house.

“Sandy,” Phil muttered to himself, “and deucedly cold to be trotting around in his bare feet, too.”

Quite casually, he opened the subject with Sandy an hour later.

“Walking around for the fun of it in that rain last night?” he asked.

“Me no go out last night.”

“Or this morning?”

Sandy shook his head.

“When it is dark me stay in,” he declared, stoutly.

“Come, Sandy, you’re not afraid of this weeteego?”

The half-breed shook his head uncertainly.

“Me hear him last night,” he said. “He holler like a wolf, off there in the bog. It wake me up in the middle of the night.”

“You think he was here last night?”

“Me hear him.”

“But it might have been the wind.”

Sandy went to the kitchen window and beckoned to Phil to follow. Silently he pointed out at the soft, glistening clay.

Leading up to the window and then away from it were tracks made by bare, naked feet.

CHAPTER VI

THE SPECTRE OF FORT DEASE

THAT day Phil and Sandy spent building a cache for their emergency supply of food. Sandy did not speak of the weeteego again. Phil thought of the strange tracks several times. The most reasonable explanation was that one of the Indians had lingered after the others or returned for something he had forgotten.

Only the fact that the feet were bare and that the tracks led up to the window perplexed him. Curiosity in the new head of the post might have prompted a peep through the window. But it was unnatural for an Indian to have done so when his tracks would show so plainly. Neither was it natural for one to go barefoot. Indians are always shod and not even the hardiest of them would wander about on so raw a night in his naked feet. Phil resolved to keep the incident in mind. Perhaps he could find in later developments some explanation of the mysterious visit.

“We put the gunpowder in the cache, too?” asked Sandy after Phil had set aside the provisions.

“Why gunpowder?”

“We always do at this fort. One keg. Then if anything happens to the trading shop, fire maybe, there is gunpowder for the Indians.”

Phil saw the wisdom of the plan at once. Indians in the Fort Dease district depend almost entirely on gunpowder for their winter’s food. They take a little pork with them when they leave in the fall, and some sugar and tea. Almost never do they take flour. But powder for their trade guns is an imperative necessity.

“Yes,” he told Sandy, “put in a keg. It will be easy enough to get it if we need it.”

For a week Phil found occupation in going over the stock in the trading shop, getting his books up to date and rearranging goods on the shelves. Another week was spent in directing Sandy through a thorough

housecleaning job, one that evidently had been neglected since the fall before.

Phil himself did a great deal of manual labour. He had discovered in those first three days of strenuous work outfitting the Indians that he slept better and there was less time for thinking. Thinking had come to mean only one thing—Joyce and Wickson. They were always ready to leap to the front whenever idleness permitted. In the long journey from Savant House, and especially after he had left Lowry, he had threshed out the whole question. He had approached the subject from every angle. He had convinced himself of the loyalty of Joyce. He knew her love was not a flash in the pan but something that would endure.

He had weighed Wickson carefully and had come to the certain conclusion that he need not fear the district manager. The man had force, determination, brains. He was a big, strong, conquering Northman. But he would be honest with Joyce if he had not been with Phil, and treachery at least was not to be thought of.

Phil, knew, too, that Wickson started with the handicap of having sent him to Fort Dease. It had aroused Joyce against him, had brought her contempt. As the year wore on and she thought of him out there alone in a lifeless world, she would come to loathe the cause of his being there.

These had been Phil's sane conclusions on his canoe journey to Dease. Fresh from Joyce's presence, still feeling her last caress, still in the ecstasy of that last moment together, it was only natural that, even in the face of a year's separation, he should look forward with assurance to their reunion the following summer. As he lay back in the canoe, looking up at the sky or with his eyes closed, he had dreamed jubilantly.

Now, in a brooding, oppressive land, Phil began to brood and to become oppressed. Winter was coming to envelop the paleozoic swamp in which he lived, coming to make it even more repellent, more monotonous. He had reached the days of inevitable inactivity, the days that were to be endless, always the same. More and more his thoughts dwelt upon Joyce, and upon Wickson. His first misgivings came, not doubts of Joyce herself but of her ability to win in the fight she must make. He became self-condemnatory. He had had no right to speak to her when he did. He should have waited. He should not have asked her to endure what Wickson's jealous love would cause her to endure.

His attitude toward Wickson underwent a gradual change. He began to suspect that the district manager was capable of anything. Despite what

Lowry had said of the man, Phil's imagination painted him with lurid, horrible colours. What had been contempt became hatred, a hatred not unmingled with fear, and a sullen resentment grew daily until it obsessed him.

These things drove out all thought of the weeteego, all recollections of the footprints in the mud that first week in spite of Sandy's morose fancies. For a time Phil had cultivated Sandy. To him there had been no distinction between master and servant, between the white race and a mixture of two races. Out there at Fort Dease, alone together, facing an interminable winter with no other companionship, why should a little matter of colour or birth be a barrier?

Then, too, Phil had always been interested in Indians and in their languages, superstitions, and psychology. In more than one lonely post he had found native and half-breed employees fertile sources of amusement and information. He rattled off Cree and Ojibwa and Chippewyan and Beaver and was the proud possessor of one of those priceless Bishop Baraga Ojibwa dictionaries.

Then, too, it is through his Indian servants that a post-manager keeps informed as to the state of affairs in his domain. Indians talk among themselves as they will not talk to white people, even to representatives of that Company which they call in their own language, "to whom we owe thanks." And Indians are as social as white people. They love to gossip, to talk scandal, to hash over the latest sensation. Gradually this talk creeps back to the post-manager and he knows, if he is wise and patient and diplomatic, everything that is going on in the territory for which he is responsible.

And so in the first weeks Phil spent long hours talking to Sandy. He learned the characteristics of every hunter who traded at Fort Dease. He learned the customs and ways of the post, of the people who made it their headquarters. He gathered and stowed away innumerable bits of scandal and practical jokes, of prowess on the part of this hunter and laziness on the part of another.

He learned how Henry Chapies had caught two black foxes on the same day and had celebrated by refusing to set another trap all winter. He learned that Job Mecham was supposed to have fits and spend an entire winter moping in his camp, while the next year he would go out and liquidate two seasons' debt with a phenomenal catch of fur.

He learned how, two winters before, Solomon Moses and his entire family had starved to death through the inability of the Fort Dease manager

and Sandy to get relief to them in time. Word had been brought in and, as the Company always does, help had been dispatched as quickly as possible.

Sandy went into a long description of that trip, of how he was caught in the worst storm he had ever known, of how he had become lost in trying to make a short cut between Cut-Bank and Berens rivers, and of how he had arrived too late and had found the family lying dead in the camp, with the exception of Solomon Moses himself, who had probably gone off in search of help and had died on the way.

After several weeks Sandy finally loosened enough to give the information that the Indians would never return to Fort Dease to dispose of their winter's hunt.

"You're crazy," Phil exclaimed.

"You wait and see."

"But why shouldn't they come back?"

"The weeteego."

"The weeteego won't keep them away from here in the spring."

"Way up the Bay there a new post, a Freetrading company. No weeteego there. In the spring all the Indians cross over and go down the White Wolf River to that post and sell their fur. They 'fraid to come back here."

"But why did they get their debt here this fall if they are afraid of the weeteego?"

"They have to have powder and everything and in the summer they not so afraid of the weeteego because they had not heard much about it and it not come here before when the Indians are here."

"How do you know they'll take their fur down the Bay?"

"They all talk about it while they wait for you to come."

In spite of the earnestness of the half-breed, Phil did not have much faith in Sandy's story. He had not seen evidences of unusual unrest among the Indians. And these Indians had never known a Freetrader, had never dealt with any one except the Hudson's Bay Company. The story was preposterous.

When Phil believed he had soaked in all the gossip of the district he failed to find Sandy particularly entertaining. The half-breed was too prone

to wander into the realms of superstition, altogether too fond of telling of the weeteego that had been visiting Fort Dease and that had driven the former manager mad.

As at the beginning, Phil did not attach any importance to this story. He had disposed of the strange footprints in the mud with the explanation that an Indian had returned for something he had forgotten. It was only the morning before that the last of them had gone.

"I know," Sandy had concluded his tale one night, "white men never believe in weeteego. But the manager who was here last year, he believe. He see the weeteego, not once but many time. He know this weeteego come to Fort Dease. The weeteego make him mad, like a loon."

And so Phil had come to abandon Sandy to his pipe and his kitchen and his fear of the weeteego. He had retired to the front of the dwelling house, to his broodings and his fears and his doubts, and the beginning of winter found him mooning alone in the living room while Sandy smoked his pipe and mooned over weeteegos in the kitchen.

It was one morning in early November, when the bogs had frozen over and the first big snow was threatening, that Sandy violated a precedent and entered the living room one morning.

"That keg of gunpowder in the cache, she gone!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

"What did you do with it?" asked Phil, disinterestedly.

"Me never go near that cache."

"But there is no one else to go near it."

"It the weeteego."

"Weeteego nonsense! Weeteegos don't steal gunpowder."

"Come and you see."

Phil followed Sandy out to the corner of the enclosure where the cache had been built. Several yards away he saw that one side had been broken into and he hurried forward. The gunpowder was gone.

Phil stood up after a quick examination and looked at Sandy.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"It all here last night. Me feed the dogs and see the cache."

"You haven't seen any more of those barefoot tracks?"

Sandy pointed to the frozen clay and shrugged his shoulders.

“Me hear him again last night,” he said. “He howl like a wolf off there,” and he pointed toward the marsh in the south.

Phil’s investigations of Indian superstitions had led to a discovery, not original with him, that the legend of, or belief in, the *loup-garou*, or werewolf, was common among some Indians, as it had been among many primitive people. He knew that the Eskimo of Alaska believes that the killer whale, “the wolf of the sea,” has the ability to change at will into the wolf, and vice versa.

But as he went back to the house, scoffing, he realized that, despite anything he might believe, the gunpowder was gone.

“Me put another keg there?” Sandy asked.

“No,” Phil answered gruffly. “We’ll keep the rest in the store.”

From that time on the weeteego began to take its place in Phil’s thoughts with Joyce and Wickson. Viewed now at a distance, the tracks of naked feet in the mud assumed a sinister significance. And the gunpowder was gone. No living person was known to be within one hundred miles of Fort Dease.

The week after the disappearance of the gunpowder the first big storm of the winter struck the coast. For a day it raged without a lull. When night came nothing was to be seen from the dwelling house windows beyond the picket fence. The great, barren waste was a mass of flying snow, and the first numbing cold had come. The little house shook as it received the full force of the wind and the eaves formed great whistles which shrieked eerily with each rising blast.

The storm had brought with it excessive brooding and a new despondency, and Phil went to bed early, tired out by the very wretchedness and suspense and growing uncertainty of his existence. He would not have admitted it, he probably did not realize it, but the land, that new, raw, barren waste, had gripped him. Aided by the forces that attacked from within, it had at last penetrated the callousness built up by a dozen years in the wilderness.

Phil did not know when he wakened or what had caused him to be transferred so suddenly from a dreamless sleep to a complete, alert consciousness. The sounds of the storm were even louder, but in the room there was absolute quiet. It was dark, too, so dark that even the window could hardly be distinguished.

For a moment Phil strained his eyes, so certain had he been that something had wakened him. When he knew that he could not see he listened intently, as if to hear something beneath the roar of the storm.

But there was nothing except perfect stillness in the room. Phil relaxed at last, concluding that an unusual blast of wind had shaken the house and disturbed him. He thought to drop off to sleep, but found his nerves peculiarly tense. He found, too, that he was unconsciously straining his ears.

A particularly fierce gust struck the house but even in the rattle and roar there came to him under it all a sound that could have been made by only one thing. The latch of the door was being lifted. The shrieking of the wind and the rattling of loose boards ceased and in the momentary stillness Phil strained to catch a repetition of the sound. There was none.

Again the wind struck the house, and again Phil caught the sound of a lifting latch. This time there mingled with it a tiny squeak as the door swung on the hinges.

“Sandy!” Phil cried as he sprang from bed. “What are you doing there?”

He ran across the room and found the door open a couple of inches. As he grasped the latch he heard the front door open, and when he had swung back the door of his own room the storm struck him, blinding and driving him back with the sting of the snow and the searing cold.

“Sandy!” he called again, now pressing against the wind and looking out. He thought he caught a glimpse of a figure on the veranda but if he did it faded instantly into the darkness and the storm.

“Sandy!”

There was no answer and he closed the outer door and went into his room. Shivering, trembling so that he could hardly hold the chimney of the lamp, for the cold had driven through, he finally struck a light. Then, the lamp in his hand, he went to the kitchen.

As he entered the hall the lamp showed at once that the kitchen door was open. He had never known the half-breed to leave it so.

“Sandy!” he called as he strode down the hall.

There was no answer, but as the lamp lighted up the kitchen Phil saw his servant’s horror-distorted face peering out from under the blankets on his bunk.

“What are you doing up at this time of night, opening my door and the front door?” Phil demanded, angrily.

The man did not answer.

“Wasn’t that you?” Phil asked as a twinge of the other’s terror touched him.

Still Sandy seemed incapable of speech, and Phil crossed over to his bunk.

“Haven’t you been out of bed?”

Sandy shook his head.

“Who was that at my door, if it wasn’t you?”

“The weeteego,” whispered the half-breed.

“Weeteego!”

“You no see him?”

“Of course not.”

“Me see him. Here, in the kitchen. He open that door. Me see him by the window. He hit that bench with his foot. Then he go back through the hall. Me never see him before.”

Phil did not comment. Slowly he turned and set the lamp on the table. There had been the quick impulse to scoff, but somehow the words would not come. He knew that Sandy had not been out of bed. He was not sure that he had only imagined a figure just outside the front door, one that had faded into the storm as a picture fades from a screen at a moving picture show.

He turned uncertainly and looked at the frightened face of the half-breed. Then he picked up his lamp and without another word returned to his bedroom.

Cursing himself for permitting Indian superstition and a half-breed’s terror to upset him, and at the same time glancing furtively over his shoulder at the door of his room, Phil crawled in between the big four-point blankets. For a time he found himself listening intently every time the wind howled. It had been only then that he had heard the noise of the lifted latch. But after a half-hour he had argued himself into a firm belief that both he and Sandy had been the victims of a caprice, or series of caprices, of the storm.

The fright, for it had been that, served to clear Phil’s brain. It raised it above the muddy, murky, befogging level to which it had been sinking.

Brooding, inactivity, growing fears and anxieties for Joyce, the depressing effects of solitude and of the land in which he lived, all had combined to rob him of mental vigour. Now he was alert, sane again, and for the first time in weeks his old humorous attitude toward life returned. With a frank grin for his terror of a half-hour before, he turned over and went to sleep.

Daylight had come when Phil wakened again, a fact that brought him up in bed with a jerk. He had been breakfasting by lamplight for a month. He listened for sounds in the kitchen but there were none. The storm still tore across the bogs and the sea, still whistled and rattled about the dwelling house. The house was very cold. Sandy always had a fire roaring in the living room that his master might have a warm place in which to dress. Phil crossed the hall, but the stove was cold and silent.

“Sandy!” he called as he started through the dining room to the kitchen. “Sandy, where are you?”

There was no answer and he threw open the kitchen door to find that room as still and as cold as the others. There was no fire in the stove, and Sandy’s bed was empty. Even the blankets were gone.

The cold decided Phil’s next move as he stood there perplexed. He ran back through the hall to his own room to get his clothes. Ten minutes later he was bundled in his skins and furs and working at the stove with numbed fingers. When the fire was burning well in the living room and he had warmed himself, he went to the kitchen and threw open the outer door.

A great mass of snow was banked up against it, packed so tightly by the wind that it remained there, a solid, finely chiselled barrier showing each little crevice in the boards against which it had been driven.

Phil closed the door against the wind and ran through the hall to the front door. It was barricaded in the same way. Sandy had gone, and he had gone in the night, so long ago that the storm had wiped out all traces of where he had passed through the door.

Returning to the kitchen, Phil again opened the door and stepped out into the big drift. He fought his way across to the trading shop, to the warehouse and back to the dog yard. The dogs were gone.

He went out through the gate in the picket fence to the Indian house. The door was closed, and the snow was banked high on the threshold. But when Phil opened it and looked in he saw that it had been opened in the night and snow tracked in, leaving great, unshapely prints on the floor.

He hurried back through the drifts to the front gate in the fence and then across to the side gate. In no place was there a sign of any one having gone out. The storm had attended to that. Then he returned to the kitchen door and saw that his own tracks had been nearly filled.

Sandy, with the only dog-team, had gone, and in the storm there was no way to follow him. Phil was alone at Fort Dease at the beginning of winter.

CHAPTER VII

THE WEETEEGO

THE weeteego—*weeteego* in Cree, *windigo* in Ojibwa—is not exactly a superstition among woods Indians. There have been weeteegos, and windigos, and the few actual instances have served to establish a firm belief in them.

The weeteego is not from the spirit world. He is a real, live Indian, either man or woman, who has obtained supernatural powers through some means or other, and who is to be greatly feared as no human force can prevail against him.

Further, and more gruesomely, the weeteego, or windigo, is a cannibal, an ogre of the wilderness that eats men, women, and children. This is its most fear-inspiring trait, but, through its supernatural powers, it is capable of any diabolical act.

Real, live weeteegos, of course, have been mentally deranged Indians who have killed and eaten members of their own families or other Indians. Insanity is often misconstrued by woods Indians as an evidence of the possession of evil spirits, and the common belief in the power of such spirits, coupled with the few real instances of weeteegoism, has resulted in more than one panic-disrupted camp.

Philip Boynton knew all of this. He had heard much of it and one actual instance had come under his observation. He knew the terror of the Indians when they believe a weeteego is near their camp, and he understood perfectly why Sandy had gone.

Phil felt only exasperation. There was no fear, no dread of what he faced. The shock of finding himself alone cleared his mind of the bloated, distorted, inflamed thoughts and he was cool, thoroughly himself again. He cursed because he faced a winter of his own cooking. He laughed at the thought of himself, a much-served servant of the great Company, cutting his own firewood. Half grinning, half frowning, he went into the kitchen to prepare his breakfast.

The snow ceased falling at noon and the sky cleared. Phil went out again to try to determine what Sandy had done. He found that the half-breed had taken the toboggan, the dogs, his snowshoes, his blankets and rabbitskin robe, four sacks of fish for the team and practically all the food in the kitchen—enough to last him two weeks.

There was nothing to indicate which way he had gone. It might have been northwest to Fort Berens. It might have been south to some hunter's camp across the bogs. It might have been up the river to Lowry's nearest outpost. It might have been up the coast to the Freetrader of whom he had told.

Of all these places, Fort Berens was the nearest, nearly two hundred miles down the shore of the Bay, a difficult, dangerous trip, with no fuel, no protection from storms. Southwest to the Freetrader's it was the same. The chances were he had gone west toward the timber country and the nearest outpost of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Phil did not find anything hopeful in this. He knew that by the time Sandy had broken a trail for two hundred miles he would have the superstitious fear pretty well worked out of his system and, because of his white blood, would be ashamed to admit the reason for his flight from Fort Dease. He might even avoid the Hudson's Bay Company altogether.

The more he thought of it the more he was convinced that the last would be the case. On that hypothesis he reasoned out his own predicament. If Sandy failed to tell that he was alone at Fort Dease the fact would not be known all winter. He even stopped to wonder if Wickson would act if he did learn of it. The district manager might ignore the fact, leave him to a year of solitude. It would be playing his game, although the Company's policy never wittingly permitted such a thing.

There would be an opportunity to send out a message in January. At most posts all the hunters gather on New Year's Day. It is an annual affair, the big occasion of the year. They bring in the first of the winter's fur, get new supplies, and, best of all, are guests of the Company, eat the Company's food and shake the hand of the Company's representative. It is the bright spot in the Indian's winter.

But Fort Dease was different. Down there on the shore of the Bay, separated from the hunting grounds by one hundred miles of barren waste, it was too far for all its hunters to come in midwinter. Sandy had told Phil that in past years only a dozen were near enough, and cared enough, to make the journey. Phil remembered, too, what Sandy had said about the hunters not

coming back to Fort Dease because of the weeteego, but he gave the report no consideration. Of course the Indians would come, and in six weeks he would have one of them started for Lowry's post with a message. In three months he would have a servant, a dog-team, and perhaps some mail.

So, in excellent spirits, Phil began his long solitude. It was even better, he thought, than to have Sandy mooning in the kitchen over weeteegos, and, besides, Sandy's bannock was far below standard.

As for the weeteego, Phil ignored it. He convinced himself that the wind had played a prank, and that Sandy, because the manager had been disturbed, had imagined all that was necessary to reach the climax of superstitious terror.

For a week things went nicely. The flight of his servant seemed to have lifted Phil above the despondency caused by the dreary life at Fort Dease and by his brooding over Joyce and Wickson. He found enough to keep him busy most of the day and he had brought in a large supply of books from the library at Savant House. He thought much of Joyce, but Wickson occupied less of his attention and his pessimism was gone.

Then, ten days after Sandy left, and as Phil sat reading one night, he was startled from his chair by a howl from out on the bog. His book slid to the floor and he half rose from his chair.

It was seldom that wolves came near Fort Dease. There was nothing for them to live on. But, though this fact flashed instantly into Phil's mind, it was something else that kept him in a tense attitude of perplexity and uneasiness. He had heard thousands of wolves howl, but he had never heard one exactly like that. As he tried to reproduce the sound in his mind he became more certain that it could not have been a wolf.

But he knew of nothing else it could have been. There was not a person within one hundred miles of him. Alone, he was out on the edge of as desolate a land as the world knew. On one side was the inland sea, an impossible thoroughfare. On the other was a storm-swept, shelterless waste, as barren of life as the moon.

The sound was not repeated and slowly Phil relaxed and sank back into the comfortable depths of his chair. He picked up his book again, listened for a moment to the warm sound of the fire in the stove beside him, glanced about the cozy room, and then, with a sheepish grin, again began to read.

The next day another snow-storm came to rage for three days. There was no need to go out, for he had brought in a large reserve supply of wood, and

Phil sat beside the stove in the living room reading. The days were very short, and, in the storm, very dark, and an interesting book upset Phil's schedule. He had not risen until late the morning of the second day of the storm, and his midday meal was forgotten until late in the afternoon. Supper came at ten o'clock that night, and it was nearly midnight when the dishes were washed. Phil returned to the book, the light, and the stove in the living room.

It was a work on ethnology and, because it was about the Cree Indians, the people he knew best, it was more absorbing than fiction. Consequently, Phil was unconscious of a draught of cold air on the floor until his legs were chilled to the knees.

But, somehow, as he glanced absently at the stove, he felt that something other than the cold had drawn his attention from the book. He had that indefinable feeling that another person was near him.

Suddenly aroused, he looked through the double door into the dining room. The door leading on into the kitchen was closed, but as Phil looked he saw the latch slowly lowered into its slot.

There was no sound. Fascinated, he did not take his eyes from the latch of the dining room door. Then he became conscious of the cold, of his numbed feet.

It aroused him from the trance into which the weird movement of the latch had plunged him. Perplexed, he glanced again at the dining room door. For the first time apprehension came. But only for a moment. He picked up the lamp and went to the door from the dining room into the kitchen and opened it.

Instantly a swirl of wind extinguished the lamp and he felt the biting snow particles stinging his face. In the first stages of panic he slammed the door against the wind and retreated to the living room, where he quickly scratched a match and touched it to the lamp-wick.

The light in the familiar room ended his panic.

He knew at once that the wind had blown open the outside kitchen door and that he had imagined the movement of the latch. He went out and closed and bolted the door.

Phil returned to the living room. In a few minutes he was again absorbed in his reading, so completely so that the first notes of the long, weird howl that came from the marshes failed to reach him. The next instant he was

sitting erectly in his chair, listening with strained ears, while a peculiar creeping sensation spread from his neck to the top of his head.

The howl ended and then began again. There was something demoniacal about it. It had a baffled, angry note, and it was not like any sound, human or animal, that Phil had ever heard before.

He did not return to his book. For a long time he sat in his chair listening for a repetition of the sound. None came, but the tense expectancy served only to increase the feeling of uneasiness. Repeatedly Phil told himself that he was a fool, that the solitude was giving him a case of nerves. He even tried to convince himself that he had not heard anything, but the memory of that unearthly howl was too vivid.

At last he looked at his watch. It was after three o'clock. He built up the fire and went to bed.

It was noon when he wakened. As he opened his eyes there flashed upon him a remembrance of the events of the night before. Chuckling at himself for his unusual case of nerves he arose and dressed. He resolved that day to mend the latch so that there might not be a recurrence of the wind-opened door. In a quick reaction from his uneasiness of the night before he began to hum as he went toward the kitchen. The song came to an abrupt end as he halted at the door.

Leading across the room from where he stood were two lines of tracks. Broad, shapeless impressions in the snow which had blown in while the door had stood open, they were irrefutable evidence that he had seen the latch slowly lowered in the slot, that he had had an unknown visitor.

In a vain effort to explain away this mystery Phil argued to himself that they must be his prints made when he went to the door to close it. But the fallacy of such an explanation was immediately apparent in the sight of his own smaller, more slender moccasin impressions leading across the room and back again. In some places his own covered the tracks of the unknown, showing that his visitor had come and gone before he had closed the door in the night.

Phil hurried across the room and opened the door, only to find a level, unbroken drift piled high against it. Outside there was not a track of anything; could not be with the storm still raging.

He swept the snow from the kitchen and started a fire. After he had eaten breakfast he went outside and searched the entire place for signs of someone

having been there in the night. But the wind and the thickly falling snow had covered everything.

That night the manager of Fort Dease feared the unknown for the first time in his life. He sat beside the stove with a book in his hands, but he did not read. Unwillingly, he found himself reviewing all that he had heard and seen since coming to Fort Dease. He remembered what Joyce had told him of his predecessor, of how the man had gone out a mumbling imbecile after a year on the marshes. He recalled the footprints in the mud, the night he had heard his bedroom door opened, the howls from out on the bogs. He remembered all the stories Sandy had told him, the snowy footprints he had found in the Indian house, those he had seen only that noon in the snow on the kitchen floor. And, most vividly of all, he remembered the latch of the door slowly dropping back into its slot.

Phil did not go to bed until nearly morning. He read fitfully after midnight, but always he stopped to listen as if expecting to hear that dreary howl from out in the storm.

The next day the sky had cleared and the wind had gone down. Phil had breakfast eaten before noon and immediately set out to examine every bit of ground about the post. The snow had drifted high against the buildings on the lee sides, while in some of the more exposed places the ground was nearly bare. He looked carefully everywhere, but not a sign of any sort was to be seen.

Returning from the Indian house he stubbed his toe on something hard in a place where the ground had been swept almost clean. The object was kicked loose and ahead of him, but Phil would have passed it had he not caught a glimpse of feathers thrust out from the snow-covered ball. He stooped and picked it up, brushing the snow off with his mittens, and found a half-eaten ptarmigan.

It was not the fact that it was a ptarmigan that caused Phil to look at it in wonder and then in growing horror. It was a realization of what had befallen the bird. It had not been cooked, not even dressed. The flesh had been torn from it in frozen strips. And no animal had done it. There were no small, sharp, awl-like tooth-marks, but wide, flat, dull imprints of human teeth. In the frozen flesh they were as evident as though Phil himself had seen them made.

In sudden horror he dropped the bird and hurried back to the dwelling house. As he forced his way through the deep drifts he looked

apprehensively out over the white waste about him. As far as he could see there was only unbroken, level, white land and unbroken, level gray sea.

For the first time in his life Phil was afraid of the solitude. The view from the fort was so utterly dead and lifeless, so weighted with sinister possibilities, so suggestive of death itself in frightful form, that it reached at last to the soul of the man it held within its grasp.

But even as he feared it, Phil defied it. Out there in the centre of that waste, with no human chance of escaping from it, in anger because of his very impotency to do so, he shook his fist at the silent, mocking, shrouded desolation and challenged it to battle.

The land, wise, patient, certain, struck greater terror by its seeming disregard of his presence, and he hurried into the house.

From that moment on Phil was never able to get away from the idea of the weeteego. He tried to read but could not. He found himself listening always for that howl from the marshes, for sounds of lifted latches, for footsteps in the hall or in the kitchen. For a time he tried to argue with himself, to convince himself that he was a fool, and in the week that followed the finding of the ptarmigan nothing happened to support his terror.

But the intangible dread persisted until the next storm, and on the second night of it Phil again heard the howl from the marshes. He was waiting for it then, heard the first shrill, wailing note, and instantly the flesh crept upward on the back of his neck.

He did not sleep that night, and when he finally went to bed after midnight, the third night of the storm, he had a rifle beside him on the covers and a small electric hand lamp, one he had brought from England, beneath his pillow. Sheer weariness brought quick slumber.

Phil found himself wide awake, eyes straining against the darkness, ears against the sound of the wind. He could see nothing, hear nothing, yet he was certain that something had wrenched him back to full consciousness.

And then came a sound, a tiny squeak, distinguishable only because it was so much more gentle than the noise of the storm. Softly Phil's hand slid under his pillow until he had grasped the flash-light. There was another tiny squeak, and he levelled the lamp at the door and pressed the button.

Sharply, clearly, distinctly, if only for a fraction of a second, there was outlined a great, black, swollen hand gripping the door, while beneath it, darting quickly out of sight, was another hand clasping a long, rusty knife.

It had been like a picture flashed on to a screen and off again. In the centre of the circle of light there was nothing except the partly opened door. And yet the hands had been there.

Phil sprang out of bed, a yell bursting from his throat. His rifle in one hand, the flash in the other, he ran down the hall, into the kitchen, and against the fury of the storm as it struck in through the open door. The room was empty, but in the snow that covered the floor were the same shapeless, blurred tracks that had been there before.

As Phil stood staring at the footprints there came from out on the marsh the long, wailing howl, rising above the noise of the wind and then ending as if cut with a knife.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BATTLE IN THE DARK

RATHER than inspiring fresh terror, the misshapen prints in the snow, though they seemed to be neither human nor animal, induced anger and utter fearlessness. The hands which he had seen at his door, great, black, hairy things, did not bring fear of some inhuman monster. The weird howls from the marshes did not instil any superstitious dread of the *loup-garou*.

Phil dressed, started a fire, swept out the kitchen, started water to boil for tea, and sat down in his living room to think over the situation. That someone, white or red, insane or criminal, was attempting to take his life was clear. Similar attempts on the life of the former manager evidently had been made, so Phil personally was not the object of attack. Rather, as manager for the Hudson's Bay Company, his life was sought.

There was nothing to cause him to believe that the unknown had a confederate, and, until the Indians arrived at New Year's, there was no means of Phil getting help. It was a duel, without hope of assistance for either.

His mind cleared by his anger, Phil quickly came to the conclusion that there was only one thing for him to do. Whether the midnight haunter of Fort Dease were red or white, sane or mad, he must be killed. Where there is no law a man must make his own, and Phil accepted that first and fundamental code.

He did not have a revolver and there was only one repeating rifle. Each night he had kept it beside his chair as he sat reading in the living room. When he slept, it lay on his bed beside him, and the flash-light was beneath his pillow. The front and kitchen doors were locked and the windows fastened. After dark each night the dwelling house became a fortress, and Phil gradually changed his habits of living so that he slept most of the day and was up the greater part of the night. Sometimes he did not waken until the early darkness of mid-afternoon had come, and breakfast and supper exchanged places.

But the days and nights passed without a return of the weeteego, as Phil had begun to refer in his thoughts to his unknown adversary. The intense cold of winter had come and as he looked out across the lifeless plain he wondered that anything could exist. The damp air was blown in from the bay, condensed and frozen, so that everything was enshrouded in a haze. Rather than hiding the terrifying vastness and desolation of the waste, the frost smoke only accentuated the utter loneliness of the land by veiling it.

Christmas came before Phil realized it, so eager was he for a return of the weeteego. As he checked off his calendar he realized that any day the hunters might come, and he began to watch the river and the marshes to the south. But the days passed, and New Year's came and was gone, and no Indians appeared.

It was the third of January before Phil would admit what it meant. The weather had been fine. There was no reason why they should not have come in to sell their furs and to replenish their supplies. When he arose at noon of January fourth he knew that Sandy had told the truth, that the hunters would not return to Fort Dease.

It was the first time the inexorable Northland ever conquered him, that he had ever shuddered as he faced the battle it always offers. Alone out there on the edge of the world, unable to send for help, no one knowing that he needed help, threatened constantly by a haunting, ghostly, demon-voiced thing with black, swollen, hairy, knife-clasping hands, it was a situation that threatened his reason as well as his courage.

Now, in addition, he faced the task of saving the business of Fort Dease from destruction by the very forces which he could not control. He had given out an average of five hundred dollars to more than forty hunters, goods to be repaid with furs in the winter and spring. If the Indians never came back, if they took their winter's catch to a Freetrader up the bay, it meant that the Company would lose the twenty thousand of debt and the future business of the post. Failure to hold the hunters would compel the closing of Fort Dease.

The solitude, the desolation, the lack of real work, and the strain of night and day defence against the weeteego had worn Phil's spirit. Now the sudden realization of the danger to the Company aroused him as nothing else could. It was a battle-cry to the loyalty of an old Hudson's Bay man. It recovered for him almost magically all his former defiance.

But it could not bring a plan of action. Desperate as was his need, he seemed helpless in the situation that confronted him. Without dogs it would

be madness for him to attempt to travel even so far as the nearest outpost of the Company. He could not carry or drag enough food to last him until he reached his destination. The trail would have to be broken through deep snow. More important still, the route must be known. Only an Indian could be trusted to make such a journey. Only an Indian could cross that vast space with certainty.

For a week Phil strove for some solution. With the weeteego still alive and threatening the post it would be futile to attempt to reason with the hunters. Nor would they be willing even under his leadership to wage war on the evil spirit. Help in that task must come from outside. And after that there must be dogs and Indians to carry the news of the capture. Passive resistance to the weeteego might suffice with only his own life in danger. But the crisis to the fort demanded action.

Why Phil felt this he could not have told. It was the unconscious effect of the history of the Company. Every post established in the wilderness was witness to the force, the unconquerable will, and the unselfish loyalty of the Company's servants. Always it had meant a struggle. Sometimes it had meant bloodshed and the sacrifice of life. Each stood as the symbol of accomplishment. The relinquishment of one would be a breach of trust to the men who had battled before him. Fort Dease must not be lost through his inactivity.

But the tenacity of his purpose brought no solution. The very hopelessness of his plight made him savage. His impotence in the face of this great need sent him pacing for long hours each night up and down the living room.

It was in one of these desperate moods and on a stormy night that the weeteego again visited Fort Dease. One of Phil's precautions, since he had converted night into day, had been to tack blankets over the windows so that no light would shine through. Then, if the unknown came, he could not tell whether Phil was in bed.

For a long time he had been sitting in his chair staring at the wall in front of him, concentrating with all his power on the problem of reaching the Indians. He was aroused by a faint noise in the kitchen and jumped to his feet, every nerve tense. Again the sound came to him, and he located it at once. The weeteego was trying to lift the latch of the outside kitchen door.

Phil turned the light very low, picked up his rifle, and walked noiselessly into the dining room. Slowly and carefully he unlatched and swung back the

door into the kitchen and listened. Again he heard a sound. Instantly he lifted his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

While the room still shook with the report, Phil ran back and turned up the lamp. He rushed out into the kitchen, his rifle in one hand, the light in the other, to find the outer door open.

A quick glance told him the room was empty. He set the lamp on the table and cautiously crossed the kitchen to close the door, only to retreat when he realized the danger of such an unprotected position. The weeteego might be waiting outside. In a close encounter his rifle would be useless.

As Phil stood there, irresolute, the weird howl, now familiar but always startling, came from on the bog. When released from the paralyzing influence of the wailing notes that rose and fell with the wind, he sprang forward and slammed the door, only to have it fly back before the storm.

Again he heard the howl, and when it ended he reached for the latch. It was gone. He groped with his fingers and found that he had shot it away when he had fired at the door.

The discovery brought a soothing relief. For a time he had believed that the weeteego had solved the lock, that bars and hinges were powerless against him. This plain evidence of the lack of the supernatural helped to bring a rational state of mind, and Phil propped a stick of firewood against the door and returned to the warmth of the living room.

He did not fear a return of the weeteego. The last howl had come from far away, and there never had been a double attack. He turned the lamp low as before and, his rifle standing against the wall beside him, stretched out in his chair. The night wore on and at last, the stimulation of excitement gone, he dropped off to sleep.

Phil believed at first it was his own voice that wakened him, a yell that still echoed in the little room as he started upright in his chair. Then he became conscious of an unfamiliar odour, a strange, nauseating, penetrating smell that drew his head sharply around toward the kitchen door. There was the scent of wet hair and untanned skins, of putrid meat and gross uncleanness.

At the same instant a huge, blurry, hairy mass hurled itself toward him in the gloom, sprawled out and fastened itself upon him, crushing him through a wrecked chair to the floor. Two hands which he knew were black and swollen and hairy reached for his throat, and there was a hot, suffocating breath in his face.

What happened in the next few minutes Phil never knew. He could not remember a conscious act, a deliberate plan. There remained only a recollection of bursting chest and of muscles driven to superhuman effort by a remorseless fear of a putrid odour from which he strove in vain to escape.

Rolling, striking, kicking, he finally got to his feet. The fear of something inhuman, monstrous, gave him a strength and a quickness he had never known, and at last he was free of everything except the overpowering odour. The table and the lamp had gone over with the first rush of his adversary, and he stood, panting, waiting, in the intense darkness.

A sound came from across the room and he braced himself for a renewal of the attack. There was a rush of padded feet on the floor, and he struck out blindly and in terror. Losing his balance, he stumbled into the hall door. Instantly he whirled around, his hands outstretched, his muscles taut.

Alert as only a man can be when he faces death, Phil stood poised for instant action. He held his breath that nothing might interfere with his hearing the faintest sound. Outside there was the noise of the wind. Inside there was an absolute stillness.

And then from out at the edge of the bog, demoniacal in its fury, moaning, baffled, now more threatening than ever, came the howl of the weeteego. It rose and fell and ended in a scream, and while it lasted Phil stood transfixed with the terror of it.

When it was not repeated he went into the kitchen and found and lighted another lamp. His first act was to pile everything movable in the room against the outer door. Then he returned to the living room to survey the damage. His big easy chair was splintered beyond repair, the lamp was smashed, the table and chairs overturned, and one blanket had been torn from over a window. He tacked this in place, and even as he did so, he looked fearfully at the window as if expecting to see a horrible, monstrous face peering in at him.

From that night on the manager of Fort Dease never knew what it was to be without fear. He was wakened from his sleep by dreams of hairy monsters that breathed fetid fumes in his face. He was startled from his book or his meals by loose siding snapping in the wind.

He had sane moments, short periods when he reasoned that he was safe from attack when there was no storm. The weeteego had visited Fort Dease only at night and only when snow and wind would cover all trace of him before daylight. There were times when he remembered that he had beaten

the weeteego in a fair fight, that he had driven him to rout after a blind struggle in the dark.

But one feature of that struggle had come to him with a terrible significance. The morning after the fight he had found in the dining room the long, rusty knife that had been thrust inside his bedroom door that night he had seen the weeteego's hands. The sight of it brought the recollection that he had heard it drop just at the instant the burly, shaggy form had hurled itself upon him.

He remembered, too, that not once had he been struck, not once had there been an attempt to gouge or bite, although he had felt the black, swollen hands over his eyes and the face of the monster had been pressed against his. There had been only an attempt to smother him by sheer weight, to bind his arms and to pinion him to the floor.

There was only one explanation of this. The weeteego had not sought to kill him. He would have kept the knife to do that, and he had a gun or he would not have stolen the gunpowder. In the struggle he could have struck, or maimed, could have torn Phil's throat with his teeth, once could have battered his head against the floor. But he had done none of these things. He had only tried to overpower Phil, to make him a prisoner.

The thought of being in the hands of the weeteego was far more terrifying than death. Whatever this monster was, sane or mad, white or red, human or half animal, to be held captive by it was unthinkable.

This fear grew as the days passed until it became an obsession. Phil forgot the failure of the Indians to come in at New Year's, the loss to the Company. It was seldom that he thought of Joyce. He did not remember Wickson at all.

His nights became interminable periods of suspense, his days short, unsatisfying naps. He became thin, haggard. He never left the house to get wood without standing his rifle by the kitchen door. When the frost smoke permitted, he spent long hours searching the white waste about him for some sign of life.

Most of the time Phil sat in a chair, merely waiting. Sometimes he had slight bursts of energy. In one of these he got bear traps from the trading shop and set them in front of the windows. He argued once that the weeteego must have food, forgetting that nothing eatable had ever been taken from the cache or the kitchen, and filled pieces of bannock with strychnine and placed them outside the kitchen door.

The weeteego came again. Every time there was a storm his howl was heard out on the marshes. Twice Phil heard him at the kitchen door and fired his rifle as quickly as he could work the lever, with no other result than a badly weakened barrier. Once more he found a half-eaten ptarmigan near the Indian house and immediately he set bear traps at the door. After the next storm he found them snapped and tossed to one side.

January passed and most of February. The last week of his third month alone at Fort Dease it snowed continuously. The great, flat waste in which he lived was wrapped in a driving white cloud. Day and night the storm continued, and day and night the weeteego howled. After three days of it Phil's nerves were strained to the breaking point. He was no longer sane, no longer capable of anything except a constant watch. He lived in a chair beside the stove, sleeping fitfully, waking in spasms of terror, listening always for the howl on the marshes.

The end of the fourth day of the storm found him so near exhaustion that he kept awake with difficulty. His nerves were raw, and twitching. He had clear moments when he feared for his reason. He drank great quantities of hot, black tea.

Darkness came early, with hardly a change from the grayness of the storm. The weeteego had not howled for twenty-four hours, and Phil had not slept, waiting for him to howl. The suspense had become unbearable, and he paced up and down the room on the border of frenzy.

And then it came, as startling as ever, wailing, moaning, threatening. Phil paused in the centre of the room and shook his fist in the direction of the sound. Then he grasped his skin coat from the wall and bound it about him with the long, coloured assumption belt. He slipped on his big gauntlet mittens and tightened the drawstring of the coat's hood about his face. Feverishly he picked up his rifle and dashed through the kitchen, out into the storm and the darkness.

His snowshoes were standing upright in a drift and in a moment his feet were in the lashings. Then, eager, intent, he listened for a repetition of the howl.

It sounded almost instantly, far out on the marsh up the river, and with a swish of flying snow Phil leaped toward it.

He had no plan, no lucid idea of what he was about to do. He only knew that off there ahead of him, somewhere in the storm, was the cause of all his trouble, the thing that was driving him mad. His one desire was to find it, to

crush it, to end its fiendish torture. He felt that he must sleep, that he must have rest, and he knew that he could not so long as the weeteego lived.

After a couple of hundred yards he paused to listen. He heard it again and plunged on at once, not realizing that this last howl was different from any he had ever heard. For the first time it had a note of fear, of dismay, almost of terror. It was short, quick, yelping like a brush wolf's clatter.

Phil ran despite the deep snow. It was terrific work, but he did not know it, no more than did he realize that he was out of sight of the fort, without a sense of direction, rushing on blindly in the storm.

Sheer weariness brought him to a halt at last and he listened. There was only the rustling of the snow particles driven across the drifts and the roar of the wind. Still expectant, still eager, Phil waited, ready to dash forward at the first note.

Then from off to the right came a single, sharp cry, so totally different from the howl of the weeteego that Phil turned, bewildered, stupefied. It was repeated, and then clearly, distinctly above the storm he heard a voice that was unmistakable—

“Phil! Phil!”

CHAPTER IX

THE WEETEEGO'S LAST ATTACK

THE voice of Joyce Plummer coming to him out of the storm and the darkness could not clear Phil's brain of the cobwebs with which it had been cluttered for more than a month. It was too unreal. The thought that it could be Joyce was too impossible. She was separated from him by five hundred miles of wilderness, by a northern winter, by conditions too severe for her soft muscles and tender skin.

And yet so compelling had been the call, Phil started at once in the direction from which it had come. As he plunged ahead, sending the snow flying from his webs, he forgot the weeteego completely. Her voice, his delirium, brought a new and more terrifying obsession. Joyce was in Wickson's power back at Savant House. He had broken trail through half a thousand miles of drifts to save her.

"I'm coming!" he cried when he heard her voice again. "I'm coming! I'll kill him."

He imagined that he was out on the lake in front of Savant House. He expected that each step would bring him to the rise leading up from the ice. Fifty yards after that and he would be at the door of the dwelling house. Would he never reach the shore? Where was Osborne?

"I'm coming!" he called again.

And then in the storm and darkness ahead of him he saw something darker, shadowy in the snow. In another moment he was upon it.

"Phil! Phil!" came a voice, and Joyce reached out her arms to him.

"Where is he?" demanded Phil as he looked over her shoulder.

"He passed me right back there, just before I called. Did you hear him?"

"No, I didn't hear any one except you."

"Not that terrible howl? I thought it was a wolf at first, and then he almost ran into me. When he saw me he turned and ran right where you

came from, and he screamed again, worse than before. Was that the weeteego, Phil?"

"Weeteego?"

He could only repeat what she said. As his brain cleared of the fog and he began to realize something of the true situation he became the more bewildered.

"There is a weeteego, isn't there? That's why I came, Phil. I heard you were all alone up here and that something terrible, a weeteego, was trying to kill you."

"You came! From Savant House?"

More than her presence there beside him in the storm, the knowledge of what such a trip must have meant served to bring order to his confused brain. But returning sanity only added to his bewilderment.

"Of course," Joyce said. "Is it far from here?"

"Far? Where?"

She peered at him anxiously, trying to see his face in the darkness.

"To Fort Dease?"

"No, no. Not far. The river must be here somewhere."

"Yes, it's right beside us."

"Then we just follow it downstream. It's not far. We'll be there in a few minutes. Come on."

"But Phil! The dogs!"

"The dogs! Of course. There must have been dogs."

He turned back and Joyce took his hand.

"They're right here behind us," she said, gently. "I was breaking trail for them. Come and we'll get them."

Together they went a few yards on Joyce's back trail.

"Here they are," she said when the leader shook the snow from his coat and sprang to his feet just in front of her. "You lead the way, Phil, and they'll follow. They know me."

He did as she said and began to break out a trail along the river, the high, cut bank of which was dimly visible on his left. He kept on until a slight rise

told him he was nearing the picket fence and then veered slightly until he struck it.

“We’re almost there,” he said as he turned. “The dogs coming all right?”

“Yes. They’re coming.”

By the time Phil had ploughed through from the gate to the kitchen door his brain had cleared completely. In the same time Joyce, remembering his queer questions and uncertain, hesitating actions, came to the firm conclusion that he, like his predecessor, had become deranged as a result of the months alone in haunted Fort Dease. So fearful had she been of finding him a babbling idiot, so certain had she been after the first words with him, Joyce found herself trembling with the dread of what she faced.

As Phil stopped at the kitchen door he saw the poisoned bannocks he had placed outside for the weeteego. He snatched them up at once and carried them inside without a word. Then the thought of the bear traps in front of the windows suddenly came to him. He hurried out and grasped the leader by the trace.

“Go inside,” he called to Joyce as he began to drag the team away from the house. “Go in where it’s warm. I’ll put up the dogs.”

He tugged violently, for the dogs, hungry and tired, had smelled the place where the food had been and were trying to break away toward the side of the house. Joyce hesitated a moment and then sprang to help him. She ran toward the wheel dog, only to be forced back by the team toward the window of Phil’s bedroom.

“Go back!” he cried, excitedly. “Go back into the kitchen.”

He dropped the leader’s trace and darted across to Joyce, who was not more than two feet from the bear traps hidden beneath the snow. He grasped her roughly and pulled her back to the kitchen door.

“Go in!” he cried as he sprang again to the leader of the now-disorganized team.

By sheer strength he straightened out the dogs in their traces, lifting the leader clear of the ground as he pulled, and still by sheer strength he dragged the team after him toward the kennels. Joyce, more certain than ever of his complete mental derangement, turned and stumbled into the dark kitchen. Her knees struck a bench and she sat down, the strength suddenly gone as was the spirit which had driven her all the way from Savant House.

Phil did not come in for fifteen minutes or more. As Joyce waited all the forebodings engendered during the four weeks of her journey from Savant House enveloped her. She was alone in a lifeless world with a fear-haunted maniac. The thing she dreaded most had come to the one she loved most, but even a sense of the responsibility that she now knew to be hers could not lift her above the crushing hopelessness of her predicament. By her long journey she had conquered the North, only to lose to it at the end.

And then Phil entered, groped about for the lamp and lit it. His quarter of an hour spent in unharnessing and feeding the dogs, in springing the bear traps he had set beneath the windows, had completed the work of restoring his wandering wits. To him responsibility had brought sanity and sanity had brought fearlessness and confidence.

“Joyce!” he cried as he turned and saw her in the light for the first time. “Why did you come out here to Dease?”

“I had to, Phil.”

She rose to her feet, hesitated a moment, searching his eyes for a sight of the thing she had heard in his voice out there in the storm and darkness. But it was not there and, dizzy with the delight of it, she swayed forward into his waiting arms.

“Why did you come?” Phil repeated after a moment.

“No one else would come. No one else would believe you needed help. And you do, don’t you, Phil?”

“Of course not.”

“And you’re—you’re all right, Phil?”

“Certainly, I’m all right. But nothing that could ever happen to me could be worth such a trip for you. What made you come?”

“Start the fire and get me something to eat and I’ll tell you as you work. I’m nearly famished. I haven’t had anything since breakfast, and you were in sight when it stopped snowing for a minute this morning, just as I was starting.”

“You were out there alone in that storm all day and camped near here last night!”

It was the thought of the weeteego, not of the storm, that brought the exclamation from Phil, and for an instant the old terror was in his eyes.

“What is it?” Joyce asked quickly.

"Nothing," he answered, thinking she had seen his fear.

"But I saw it, just before I called to you, down there on the bank of the river. Was that the weeteego?"

"Weeteego! Nonsense!"

"But Phil! I saw it, and you were out there looking for it. And the half-breed who ran away and left you alone said he saw it and that you did, right here in this house. The Indians who brought me almost here were afraid of it."

Before Phil returned from putting up the dogs he had determined, if possible, to keep all knowledge of the mysterious spectre of the storms from Joyce. His own haunted weeks were so vivid, the terror of them so fresh, the delirium from which he had just been freed still so oppressive, he knew that she must be spared an experience similar to his own.

"Sandy was always seeing things," he replied, carelessly, as he busied himself with the fire. "I'm glad he got out. Only mooned around the kitchen here talking weeteego until he was off his head."

"But Phil! The man ran past me back there on the river! Who was he?"

"An Indian was in to trade this morning. Perhaps he was camped somewhere around here and when he ran into you he thought you were the weeteego, though there never was a weeteego outside of Sandy's head."

"And you haven't seen anything, or heard anything, since you've been here?"

"Not a thing."

Phil was bending over the kettle as he spoke. Suddenly he leaped to the middle of the room, every nerve taut, his eyes staring at the door. Joyce at the same instant had jumped from her bench and clung to him. Together they stood for a moment, tense, alert, terrified, while above the sound of the wind rose and fell that demoniacal howl of the weeteego.

There was a new note of savagery, of desperate defiance, in the long, weird wail, and it ended in a diabolic shriek that left Phil as nerveless as it did Joyce.

But he was the first to recover, and his laugh was perfectly natural as he said:

"That certainly startled me. It's the first sound I've heard all winter, unless I made it myself. It isn't often a wolf comes around Fort Dease."

He turned back to the stove, but Joyce grasped his arm and pulled him around until he faced her.

“Listen, Phil,” she commanded. “Don’t try to deceive me. You can’t. You never could with those eyes and that face and your nervousness. I know Sandy told the truth. I felt it from the first. That is why I came. And because I know some of it, you must tell me everything. I’m here, and I’m going to stay here with you. Now tell me about this weeteego.”

Phil knew at once that it was useless to try to deceive Joyce. As he saw how cool and unterrified she was, as he thought of the five hundred miles she had travelled to be with him, he felt suddenly ashamed of his own weakness in succumbing to something that had only the appearance of the supernatural.

“I don’t know what is,” he said, simply. “It’s human, of course, but whether it’s red or white, or insane or not, I don’t know. It’s clever enough to come only when there is a storm so that I haven’t been able to track it, and it stands off there on the marshes and howls like you just heard. Of course that sort of thing gets on your nerves when you’re all alone in this hole.”

“But doesn’t it do any more than howl?”

Phil hesitated. He did not want to tell all that the weeteego had done. As he searched his imagination for a harmless story he saw Joyce look at the splintered door.

“Did he ever get in?” she asked.

“He always makes an attempt,” he answered, suddenly finding himself unable even to belittle the weeteego’s activities. “Once since Sandy left he did. He caught me asleep in the living room, but I managed to get loose and he ran.”

“Why didn’t he kill you while you were asleep?”

“That’s the queer part of it. He could have done so, easily. But he seemed bent on capturing me alive.”

“Capturing you alive!”

Joyce lost some of her self-possession and courage, but she quickly recovered both.

“Why haven’t you killed him?”

"I have tried. I have shot at him there at the door three times, and I've set bear traps, and I've put out poisoned food. But he never wants food. He never takes it when he can. Long ago I made up my mind to take my first chance to shoot him, but he never comes except in big storms and at night."

"But with both of us here, and he knows you are not alone now, there will be no danger," Joyce said, confidently.

"No, because we are going to leave at once."

"Phil! Not desert the Company!"

"The Company has been deserted. This weeteego has driven all the Indians away. None of them came in at New Year's and they won't come in the spring. I gave out twenty thousand dollars' worth of debt and the Company stands to lose that and all future business here. I've got to get out and round up the Indians before they get to the opposition down the Bay this summer. I would have been away from here six weeks or more ago if I could have gone. But without dogs it would have been impossible."

"And we'll go out together!" Joyce cried excitedly. "Phil, that will be the jolliest sort of a trip. Just you and I together in the wilderness. We can do it, can't we?"

"I was thinking of taking you only so far as Lowry's nearest outpost and then getting Indians to guide me to the hunters' camps. Only an Indian could find them. But Joyce! You haven't told me how you got here."

"But we can go to the outpost together," she cried, ignoring his question. "We'll do that much together, and, Phil, we'll save Fort Dease in spite of Wickson."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Wickson wouldn't send help when he heard what had happened here. He laughed and said there was nothing the matter, that you had let an Indian superstition ruin the post and could stay here until you got out the best way you could. He said if you weren't man enough to handle some gullible natives he didn't want you in his district."

"He didn't say that to you?" demanded Phil, fiercely.

"No, he told Mr. Osborne, and Mrs. Osborne told me. Then he left on a trip of inspection in the western part of his district. The day after he left I started. The Osbornes tried to keep me. They said I could never get here. They said you were all right and that the story had grown by the time that it reached Savant House, as such stories always do. They even believed that

Sandy had run away because he had had trouble with you and that there wasn't any weeteego after all.

"But I came, anyway. I had some money, and Mrs. Osborne helped me to get two Indians and two dog-teams, and we went to Mr. Lowry's post, and then to his outpost, and then here. Only yesterday morning the Indians refused to go any farther.

"They had heard about the weeteego and they said night before last that they had heard it howl. They were going to take both teams of dogs and go back. But I made them leave one for me, and I broke trail all yesterday and to-day. It wasn't far. Only fifteen or sixteen miles, they said, right down the bank of the river. And I had ridden nearly all the way from Savant House and wasn't tired."

"Did they start right back?" asked Phil, quickly.

"No. They said they would wait there a day and rest. Then they were to start straight back for the outpost."

"And had you followed the river very far before they stopped?"

"Yes, for several days."

"That's great!" he exclaimed, joyfully. "We need only follow the river until we strike their trail. It will be easy going after that and it will be certain. We won't have more than three days of travel before the end of the storm permits us to see where they went, and we may even catch them."

It was a great relief to Phil, for after he had broached his plan of starting back at once with Joyce he had realized that he would be risking her life as well as his own in an attempt to cross the white desert without a trail to guide him.

"We'll start the moment the storm is over," he said as he turned again to his task of preparing a meal.

After supper they sat in the living room for a long time. The weeteego was forgotten. The storm had ended soon after supper and the sky was clear. They knew they could start in the morning, but, though they needed the sleep, there was too much to talk about. Joyce drew from Phil much of the story of his lonely vigil out there on the edge of the world, but mostly they talked of themselves, in that happy, aimless fashion of lovers.

Inevitably the subject of Wickson came up.

“Did he bother you?” asked Phil, vehemently.

“Not disagreeably. Really, Phil, had it been under other circumstances I wouldn’t have cared so much. He is an unusual man in many ways. He can be most interesting, and agreeable, only he never could be to me after what he made you suffer. I’d be afraid of him, if I were near him too long. He gives the impression of invincibility, somehow. You can’t help but believe he gains everything he sets out to gain. Just that impression of him weakens any one. I—I’m afraid of him.”

Phil glared at the stove and said nothing.

“But you’re not afraid! For me!” Joyce cried.

He was at her side in an instant.

“Never, sweetheart,” he whispered. “After what you’ve done I’ll never again know what any sort of fear is.”

Phil turned his bedroom over to Joyce and said he would make a bed on the couch in the living room.

“But the weeteego?” she asked. “Hadn’t we better take turns sleeping?”

“He’ll never bother us on a clear night. He never has. He’s clever enough to come only when he will leave no tracks. No, we needn’t worry about him. I’ll sleep out here, and as soon as we can in the morning we’ll get started.”

But Phil did not prepare for sleep. He had no intention of doing so. Whatever the weeteego’s habits, he would not take any chances so long as Joyce was in the house. He piled furniture against the kitchen door. In the living room he turned the lamp far down and sat on the couch with his back to the wall, his rifle beside him. He made himself as uncomfortable as possible that he might not fall asleep.

But his exhaustion was far greater than he had realized in the excitement of Joyce’s arrival. Once in the night she crept out and found him lying on his side, deep in sleep. She brought a blanket from her bed and laid it gently over him, dropped a soft kiss on his hair and went back to bed.

When Joyce wakened again it was daylight. She listened for a moment but there were no sounds. She knew that Phil had meant to start as quickly as possible and she believed that he was out harnessing the dogs.

But when no sound came after fifteen minutes of drowsy waiting she sprang from bed and rushed out into the living room.

“Phil!” she called when she found the place empty. “Phil!”

The room was very cold and she went out to the kitchen. The outside door was open. The sight of it threw her into a vague panic.

“Phil! Phil!” she cried, as she rushed to look out.

In the deep snow near the house she saw the tracks made when she and Phil had come with the dogs. The storm had half buried them, rounding the edges and corners, rendering them shapeless.

But over all else, sharp and clear and standing out with sculptural distinctness, were the tracks of a toboggan that had been brought to the door and then taken away. Beside it were great, shapeless footprints, and directly in front of the door was a huge, round, deep impression that might have been made by a sack of grain tossed into the drift.

Again Joyce called, but her voice was lost instantly in the silence of the vast, desolate waste. Terrified, she rushed back to the bedroom and put on her moccasins and outer clothing. Fastening the sash about her skin coat as she ran, she went out to the store, to the dog kennels, to the servant house and to the Indian house.

But nowhere was there a track, nowhere a sign of Phil, except the bright, clear impression of a toboggan that had been drawn out through the gate and then north down the shore to the ice along the edge of the bay.

From where she stood on the bank of the river she could not see any moving thing within many miles. She looked north, south, east, and west, but everywhere the view was the same. The white expanse was unbroken.

Back at the kitchen door she looked carefully at the tracks made since the storm had ended. Chiselled in the great, shapeless hole in the drift was something that furnished her first clue. As if it had been stamped in hot wax, there was the unmistakable impression of a knotted rope. Even the twisted strands were clearly defined.

In terror Joyce glanced at the trail made by the toboggan down to the shore ice. It went straight out from the land until it disappeared on the stone-like crust. And as she looked she knew that the weeteego had accomplished his purpose, that he had captured Phil alive.

CHAPTER X

SOLOMON MOSES

PHIL wakened once in the night after Joyce had placed the blanket over him. He threw it off and again sat bolt upright, his back to the wall.

For a time the fear of what might have happened while he was asleep kept him alert. But his nervous exhaustion and need of sleep were far greater than he realized, and in half an hour his head had dropped to one side and he was slumbering so soundly that even the penetrating odour that soon after filled the room failed to rouse him.

So extreme was his exhaustion that he was easy prey for the great, hairy figure that padded softly across the room from the kitchen door and looked down at him. The next instant a long, narrow bag of soft caribou skins, the hair on the outside, was slipped over his head. His body was given a quick pull and then a thrust and his head was on the floor and his feet sticking into the air over the edge of the couch.

So quickly was it done that Phil did not recover complete consciousness until the bag had been slipped up over his feet and tied tightly. His head had been thrust through a small hole in the end but all the rest of his body was completely enclosed. The sack was so tight he could not draw his arms up from his sides, and even as he realized what had happened the weeteego began lashing him around and around with a rope so that he was perfectly helpless.

Phil did not make a sound. After the first convulsive twist of his body he did not even struggle. He realized at once that he could do nothing to escape and his first thought was that, by keeping quiet, by not calling for help, the weeteego would bear him away without disturbing Joyce.

When his prisoner was firmly bound, the weeteego stood up and looked around. He took one step toward the hall and a yell of warning was upon Phil's lips. But the bulky, furry figure, shadowy in the dim light from the low-turned lamp, turned suddenly, picked something from the floor and the next moment was pulling Phil's otter-skin cap down over his ears. Then he

lifted his prisoner, carried him out through the kitchen door and dumped him into a snowdrift.

Phil landed in a sitting position and saw at once that he had been left alone and also that he could, by a series of jerking, convulsive movements, hop back into the kitchen. Before he could draw up his body for the first movement the weeteego reappeared from around the corner of the building with a toboggan. He lifted his prisoner into it and began to lash him fast.

Instantly Phil strove with all his strength to throw himself off. He lifted his legs and tried to thrust the weeteego from him. He lifted his head and butted futilely. But the great, hairy odourous thing only laughed as he sprawled out on top of his victim and continued to lash him down. In two minutes his task was completed and he had jumped ahead to the traces. The toboggan was jerked forward and Phil saw the gate-posts flash by. There was a short struggle in deep drifts and then his head dipped and he shot down the gentle slope to the bay.

The soft, grating sound of the toboggan in the snow ceased and he began to bump along on the hard crust and jagged pieces of broken ice. Straight out from shore he went and then came a sudden halt. Phil saw the weeteego bending over him and then his face was covered with a piece of caribou hide. It was very cold and he was glad of the protection, but instantly he knew that it had been done for another purpose. Around and around, until it fairly spun, the toboggan was whirled until Phil had no sense whatever of direction. Then the weeteego started off at a trot, the toboggan jerking and bumping over the hard drifts and broken ice behind him.

As Phil lay there, unable to get an inkling from the stars as to which way he was going, bound so that he could not move, thumped and battered by the constant pounding of the toboggan on the wind-carved, tide-disrupted surface, his thoughts were more of Joyce than his own predicament. She would waken in the morning to find him gone. She could not find a track on the hard surface of the bay to indicate what had happened to him. It would be impossible for her to go back to Lowry's nearest outpost alone. No one would come to Fort Dease for four or five months. She could not survive until then.

There was, too, the possibility that the weeteego might return and capture her. What that would mean he could not even guess, except that it would be something horrible. He knew that, at any risk, he must escape and return to her or at least kill this monster that now held him prisoner.

In the face of what might happen to Joyce, Phil had no time to consider his own predicament except from the angle of regaining his liberty. With the memory of his fear-haunted months so vividly fresh, with his knowledge of the depressing effect of the vast desolation by which she was surrounded, with the horror of this mysterious spectre of Fort Dease multiplied by its ultimate success, he was ready to cry out in futile protest against the fate Joyce could not evade. He writhed and twisted inside his tightly lashed bag, and when he recognized the uselessness of it he lay still and cursed until stopped by a wild, mocking, exultant burst of laughter from the traces ahead.

Hour after hour Phil was dragged across the rough surface of the shore ice. Occasionally there was a short stop for rest, but the thing ahead seemed to be more tireless than a sledge dog. It romped at times as if from sheer excess of spirits, but not once, except when it had laughed, had it taken any notice of its prisoner.

Dawn came and the light was reflected from under the skin drawn across Phil's face. Two more hours went by. They seemed like weeks to the prisoner. Despite the thick sack in which he was bound, the lashings did not permit circulation and the intense cold reached him. He became more and more cramped and stiff and in time the sluggishness became of the mind as well as of the body. The constant hammering of the toboggan on the rough going, the monotonous jerking and thumping, combined with the cold to bring a lethargy which he could not shake off.

It was while Phil was in this stupor that the toboggan finally struck a smooth, even trail and ascended a slight rise. When he finally became conscious that he was no longer being bumped and mauled on the shore ice, he strove to remember which way the toboggan had turned when it struck the land. Unless he knew there was no way to tell whether he had been carried northwest or southeast from Fort Dease. And without that knowledge he could never return should he escape from the weeteego. There would not be a mark on the packed snow or ice over which he had been hauled, and he might wander on to starvation, all the time leaving Joyce farther behind him.

While he was still cursing himself for having relaxed his vigilance, there was a sudden shading of the light reflected up beneath the piece of caribou skin that covered his face. Then the toboggan stopped and his head was uncovered.

The first thing Phil saw brought paralyzing amazement. Above him and all about him were trees, bent, ragged spruce trees thirty feet high and six

inches thick at the butts. As his stunned mind accepted them it accepted also what they told him. There were no trees like these within one hundred miles of Fort Dease. He must have become unconscious from the cold and exhaustion, had been delirious and been days on the journey instead of a few hours. If he did regain his liberty he could never find his way back to Joyce, could never make the trip without adequate equipment even if there were a trail.

Completely unnerved by his discovery, Phil turned his head listlessly and for the first time saw the weeteego in daylight. The man was standing a few feet away, calmly surveying his prisoner.

There was nothing maniacal, nothing malignant, in the face Phil saw. It was that of an Indian, with all the Indian's usual immobility of feature and inscrutability of eye. It told nothing, either of friendliness or hostility, of power or weakness, of madness or rationality.

But there the similarity to the usual type of native ceased. Never had Phil seen an Indian dressed in anything except the manufactured garments furnished by the Hudson's Bay Company. This man was clothed only in skins, skins half tanned and with the fur on. Great, bulky, shapeless folds of them enveloped a body larger than that of the usual native and gave him the appearance of a huge, hairy, upright animal. Even the skill of the savage in fashioning such garments was absent. Their barbarous crudeness gave the impression of something bestial.

The Indian began at once to take off the lashings that bound Phil to the toboggan. He removed the rope which he had wound about the bag and his prisoner stretched and drew up his cramped legs and arms with a sigh of relief. That sigh brought the first change of expression in the man's face. To Phil's amazement, he smiled, a friendly, understanding smile that said plainly, "I thought you'd feel better."

The Indian disappeared and Phil twisted himself about so that he could see a skin wigwam behind him. He heard the tiny crackle of a newly kindled fire, and then the Indian came out and carried him inside.

Phil began to hope that the friendliness of the smile was to be extended to deeds as well, for the Indian began at once to untie the mouth of the bag at his feet. But he had no sooner slipped it back than he passed a leather thong tightly about the ankles. Then from under a mass of skins and fur at the rear of the wigwam he drew a piece of chain, red and pitted with rust. For a moment he fondled it proudly, triumphantly. Then he began to fasten it about Phil's legs just above the ankles. He worked deliberately, yet certainly,

as though by a prearranged plan. The links were small enough to permit tying, and the chain was long enough for a series of intricate and clever knots which Phil knew never could be untied.

He did not struggle as he watched, for he knew it was useless. From the beginning he had seen that a trick alone would give him the necessary opportunity to kill his captor or to escape. But as he saw the skilful manner in which the Indian tied the chain his courage vanished. Only a file could ever free him.

The chain adjusted to his satisfaction, the Indian removed the leather thongs and pushed back the bag until he could reach Phil's hands. These he bound with thongs to a leather belt he placed about Phil's waist and then removed the bag entirely.

Phil sat up to be nearer the fire and his captor at once stretched a piece of rope from the belt at the back to a stake which was firmly imbedded in the frozen ground. Another rope was run from the chain to another stake in the front, and Phil found himself able to sit up, lie down, or roll over, but powerless to move his hands more than six inches from his waist or draw up his feet so that he could work at the chain.

His prisoner tied to his satisfaction, the Indian placed more wood on the fire and then went out. He had not spoken, had not given a sign of his intentions or plans, and Phil, though he knew the man was a Cree, had made no attempt to speak to him. He knew that, above all things, he must not act too quickly, and that by waiting and watching he could gain more information than by asking questions.

The whole thing was a mystery to the Hudson's Bay man. He had spent a dozen years in the North but never had he heard of anything similar to the present situation in any of its aspects. Indians had rebelled, had attacked forts and killed servants of the Company in the old days. In more recent years, within Phil's own experience, there had been sporadic, isolated instances of individuals running amuck. But never had there been an attempt to make a white man prisoner in this amazing fashion.

That the Indian was the man he had come to refer to as the weeteego there was no doubt. And as Phil thought of the real meaning of the word, he shivered. Had a weeteego decided to eat a white man instead of some one of his people? If he had, there was absolutely no hope of escape. Bound as he was, Phil knew it was useless to try to free himself. He knew the Indian would maintain constant vigilance and that a blow on the head or the thrust of a knife would be the means of frustrating any dash for liberty.

Horrible as was the idea of being eaten by this savage, desperate as he found his situation, Phil was reassured somewhat by the apparent sanity of his captor. A weeteego is mentally deranged. This man appeared to be entirely normal. And came the encouraging thought, if he had intended only to eat his prisoner he would not have taken the trouble to capture him alive. He would have killed him the first night he had gained entrance to the living room while Phil was asleep.

But despite the apparent sanity of the Indian as expressed by his face and actions, there remained the utter lack of anything else that was usual. The man was dressed entirely in skins, poorly tanned or not tanned at all. There were no dishes for cooking and on the other side of the wigwam was a large piece of meat that had been gnawed when raw and frozen. The dirt and filth were unspeakable, and the odour, as the fire warmed the interior of the shelter, became nauseating.

Except for the chain and piece of rope with which he was bound and the trade gun lying on a pile of fur beyond the fire, there was not an evidence that the Indian had ever seen or been associated with white men. Everything about the camp was utterly primitive. Such a thing was unheard of. For a thousand miles in every direction the natives had known the Hudson's Bay Company for two hundred years or more. They had abandoned their skin clothing for wool and cotton generations before. Kettles and various trade sundries were indispensable.

As Phil puzzled over this unaccountable fact the Indian reëntered the wigwam. He piled more fuel on the fire and then began to gnaw at the frozen meat. After a few bites he held the huge piece in the flames until it was blackened and then tore off the melted part in great strips.

To Phil the sight was not disgusting. On more than one instance he had been reduced to fare not much better and he was very hungry. He had not eaten much the night before because of the excitement of Joyce's arrival. It had been very cold and the spectacle of food being eaten brought instant realization of his famished condition.

He did not speak, but the Indian caught his expression and grinned across the fire at him. He held out the huge piece of meat and then withdrew it, chuckling as he saw the disappointment in his prisoner's face.

In that grin and that chuckle Phil found something that brought greater fear than anything that had happened since he had wakened to find himself in the bag. They told him beyond doubt that the man was a maniac. It had shown for an instant in his eyes, in the cunning smirk, in the wild notes of

his laugh. Fascinated by the terror of his predicament, Phil watched the man devour pound after pound of raw meat.

The man fairly wallowed in his food. He smeared his face and his hands and his fur clothing with the grease that oozed from between the tissues as the heat of the fire drove out the frost. He pulled with his teeth and his hands until great, dripping, red pieces were torn off. He crowded these into his mouth and gulped them down as does a dog, without chewing.

The quantity of food he consumed was enormous, but the more he ate the more ravenous he became, the more insane the gleam of his eyes when he glanced across the fire at his prisoner. As Phil watched, spellbound, he wondered if the man would ever satisfy a hunger that seemed to grow the more he ate.

The meal ended only when the piece of meat, which Phil estimated had weighed all of ten pounds, was consumed. The Indian wiped the backs of his black, bloody, hairy hands across his face, glared fiercely at his prisoner, threw himself back against the pile of fur and skins behind him and immediately was asleep.

It was more a stupor than a slumber, as Phil soon discovered by experimenting with various noises he was able to make by rattling the chain that held his legs, coughing and rolling about. The Indian had become drunk with an excess of food, was the victim of a gluttonous debauch.

When he was satisfied that his captor would not wake, Phil began to test the thongs and ropes which held him. He strained and pulled but could not gain an inch. He twisted and turned his hands but he could not reach a knot. One attempt showed him that it was utterly impossible for him even to touch the chain that held his feet together.

He did not abandon the effort after the first trial. So long as the light lasted he continued to twist and turn, to tug and jerk. After a few minutes his exertions became frantic, and he rolled and writhed on the ground in a spasm of terror and desperation, ceasing only when exhausted. When his strength began to return he resolved not to use it in so futile a fashion. Rather he became cool and determined. Systematically he attempted to discover some way to free himself. He did not allow himself to be hurried by the fear that the Indian might waken. He knew it was his one chance, that his life and that of Joyce depended upon his success.

But darkness found him no nearer freedom than when he had begun. For at least five hours he had had every opportunity to attempt escape. Yet each knot seemed tighter than before, each thong as strong.

The fire had gone out and Phil became very cold. He was lying on several skins and he managed to work one or two up and around him, but not sufficiently to keep him warm. His hands and feet were soon numb and he suffered far more than when he had been wrapped in the caribou-skin bag on the toboggan.

When he had abandoned his idea of freeing himself he turned his attention to the peculiar facts connected with his imprisonment. He remembered that the Indian had appeared to be perfectly sane until he had begun to eat. At first he had not seemed to be inordinately hungry, but as the meal progressed he had torn at the meat more and more savagely, had gulped larger pieces of it whole, and all the time the insane light in his eyes had increased, until at the end he had glared at his prisoner with blazing ferocity. Food seemed to have made the man mad. Food seemed to have aroused a primitive passion.

Repeatedly Phil found himself reviewing all that he had learned about the people of his district. Sandy had exhausted his store of gossip. Something in it must give a hint as to the identity of this man. To be sure, the secret of the weeteego was solved. But who had become the weeteego? Which of the few Indians in the district had become this deranged creature.

As Phil searched his memory he could not banish from his mind the spectacle of the Indian at his meal, the thought that through food alone had he seemed to become a maniac. Perhaps there lay the explanation. A winter of starvation, the abandonment of hope, and then the coming of the caribou and the resultant frenzied debauch! It was enough to weaken a man's mind, to make him a monomaniac on the subject of food. Food was all men lived for in the Far North. Food meant everything. Its need was constant, imperative, and its absence was an unending peril.

And then the two thoughts coincided. Food and the story Sandy had told of the Indians who had starved to death. Sandy had found the bodies, except that of the head of the family, who had wandered off, presumably in a vain search for food.

Instantly the entire story of the weeteego, his actions, his life alone through two winters, his strange behaviour and the terror it had brought to the fort, all became instantly plain. All except his indomitable determination to make a Hudson's Bay Company man prisoner. Phil saw how the man had been driven insane by the slow extinction of his family and his own craving for food, how the long, cold, foodless winter had upset his reason and driven

him out to wander across the marshes like a wolf. But why had he haunted Fort Dease and why had he captured him?

The cold finally put an end to Phil's conjectures. Slowly the numbness crept up to his brain and at last he lost consciousness.

It was still night when he opened his eyes. A bright fire was burning, his body was warm again but each muscle seemed a bundle of shooting, fiery pains. With difficulty Phil twisted his head and looked across the blaze.

The Indian was sitting quietly beside the fire. He returned Phil's glance calmly, with just a suggestion of the friendly smile of the day before. There was nothing wild or disordered in his eyes or features, and Phil's hopes rose instantly. The man was a monomaniac on the subject of food. If he could catch him in a sane moment he might gain the advantage.

"Wotcher," Phil said calmly, employing the common method of greeting.

The Indian looked up quickly, a new light in his eyes, something as a sailor might have done had he been long absent from the familiar sounds of the sea.

"Solomon Moses," Phil exclaimed, sharply.

"Yes," was the slow answer in Cree.

"Where have you been, Solomon Moses?"

"I am dead," was the calm reply.

"How long have you been dead?"

"This is the second winter."

"Why do you tie the hands and feet of the man who has never harmed you?"

Again the maniacal light flashed in the Indian's eyes, and Phil shivered as he saw it. But when Solomon Moses spoke he was as calm and as sane as his hearer, though he sometimes faltered in choosing a word, as if speaking were an unfamiliar task.

"Two years ago I take my family out for the hunt as I always do, in the same place where I have always gone, and where my father and his father hunted. The Hudson's Bay Company has always known where I hunt. In the early winter the caribou do not come. I wait and wait, for they always have come, and all our fish is gone. My wife and I set snares for the rabbits, but there are only a few. Neither are there many ptarmigan. The dogs die

because there is nothing for them to eat. The little ones are crying for food and I say to my wife: 'I will go out and find the caribou. In ten days I will come back.'

"But I do not find the caribou and when I come back in two weeks my wife is so weak she can not set snares. I am very weak, but I set some snares and catch two rabbits and leave them with my wife and the three children and go out again and look for the caribou. I find the trail of an Indian hunter and follow it until I come to his camp. He has a little meat and he is going to the fort and he says he will tell them there that I and my family are starving and I have no dogs and can not come in for food. He promised me that and I saw him go.

"I took what little meat he could let me have and went to my camp. My wife could not lift her head, and I gave her the meat for her and the children and went out again to look for the caribou. I was very weak but some days I would kill a ptarmigan.

"At last I get back to my camp. I do not find caribou, and I am very weak. My wife is lying in the cold wigwam, with no fire for she is too weak to get wood, and beside her two of the children are lying dead and the last one is dying. When my wife doesn't see I take one of the children out and cut off some meat from its legs and take it in and put it in the pot and make a soup and feed her, and then I go out again and look for the caribou.

"That week I find two ptarmigan. The next week I find a rabbit. Then I go home, and my camp is still, and my wife and the last child are dead. And the Company has not come with food."

Solomon Moses had spoken quietly, dispassionately, but his story had been so vivid that the pathos of it made Phil forget for the moment his own danger. He had only pity for the savage that sat across the fire from him.

But when Solomon Moses spoke again his voice had changed, and the wild light was in his eyes.

"I turn and leave them there because I have not the strength to put them out of the way of the wolves," he said. "I go out until I can not walk, and I lie down in the snow and die. And then my spirit sees a caribou, and another, and more and more, and I am in the middle of the herd, and my spirit kills many of them and feasts and grows fat. And when I have grown fat with the meat I remember my wife and children and I say:

"They are dead, dead because the Company did not send food when it was told they were starving and that I had no dogs to go to the fort. It is the

Company that killed them, and it is the Company that must pay. I will go to Fort Dease, and I will take the man there and carry him off and tie him up where no one can find him and where he can never get away, and I will keep him there and watch the hunger come and tear him. I will sit beside him and eat, and I will never give him any, and when he asks for meat I will laugh. After a while he will be like my wife and children when I find them in my camp, cold and hard and white like the pieces of ice that stick up on the shore of the salt water.’”

CHAPTER XI

THE SPLINTERED BONE

THE effect of Solomon Moses' story upon Phil was paralyzing because of the very horror and hopelessness of his position. Unable to escape, watched by a cunning, half-crazed savage, already suffering from exposure and hunger and his nerves shaken by the trying ordeal of the long winter, he was ill-prepared to meet a desperate situation.

The grim motive back of his captor's actions, the passion of the primitive man for revenge, the cunning with which his project had been carried out, the indomitable patience that had carried him past every failure and through two long winters, each in itself was enough to cause complete despair.

But, critical as was his position, after the first quick panic Phil's courage returned. At last he knew the danger he faced. At last there was no mystery, nothing spectral, nothing suggestive of the supernatural. There was no longer an unknown to dread, no longer any uncertainty. For the first time since he had seen the prints of bare feet in the mud the previous Fall, weirdness, stealth, suspense and nameless hazard were absent. Everything was out in the open, plain, understandable. The very reality of his danger served to give Phil a cool, clear brain, even a slight assurance.

Then, too, he grasped the situation as a whole. He saw that it was not only his safety, his life. His vision clear of dread and mystery, he saw that upon him alone depended the safety of Joyce and the success of the territory of which he was in charge. He must escape and protect her and he must round up the hunters before they went to the opposition down the bay.

Phil did not waste any time. Twelve years of close contact with the natives had given him a thorough knowledge of Indian psychology, a complete understanding of the Indian character. He did not undervalue the red man's ability, as many white men are prone to do, nor did he allow romantic misconceptions to overrate it.

To Phil the Indian was what he really is, a child, with all a child's fears, all a child's lack of control of primitive passions. To Phil, too, he was the

child accustomed through generations to accepting the advice and guidance of the Hudson's Bay Company, even to submitting to its reprimands.

He did not believe that Solomon Moses was insane except possibly on the one subject of food. An Indian can make himself believe many things, can bring about a state of mind that borders upon or gives the impression of insanity, a condition from which he can be jolted back to the normal.

"Look here," snapped Phil in Cree, "you can't do this, Solomon Moses. You'll get caught. You'll be hung. The police and the Company men will come, and there will be an end of you."

"There is no one to come."

"There is. A dog-team just came to Fort Dease, driven by an Indian, and he said four teams with white men were only a day behind them. They will track you to this place and take you."

"But they can not take a spirit. I am dead."

"You know you are not dead. You only try to think you are. If you are dead, put your hand in the fire there and see if it will burn."

The Indian did not reply and his eyes wavered as had many a hunter's when Phil lectured him on laziness or extravagance or failure to pay his debt. It was the first point in Phil's favour and consciously now he continued the rôle he had naturally assumed, that of father of his flock.

"You can't fool me, Solomon Moses," he exclaimed, confidently. "You went out and found the caribou and killed and ate. You did not die. You only tried to think you were dead. You have lived alone ever since and have not gone among your people and your brain has become soft and you do foolish things. A little boy would know that he can not kill a white man, especially a Company man, and live."

The Indian had lapsed into the sullen, silent mood characteristic of his people when criticized. It is not unlike that of a spoiled child, and though it gives the impression of hopeless perversity, it did not deceive Phil.

"Those white men and the Indians are looking for me now," he continued. "The Indians are with them to track you and the toboggan. They will surely come before I starve to death, and when I tell them what you have done they will find you or the policemen will come from the West. You know that they never fail."

Solomon Moses did not look up from the fire, did not indicate that he had heard.

“Come,” Phil commanded. “Take off these thongs. Take them off and give me something to eat and something to keep out the cold.”

There was a slight, uneasy shifting of the Indian’s position and Phil immediately pressed his advantage.

“See here,” he said, “you were a good hunter and you would like to return to the hunt and get debt from the Company. You have not gone back because you have a debt and no furs to pay. The Company is not angry because of what you have done. The Company knows you had a bad spirit and that it made you do things you did not want to do. Take off these thongs and go back to the fort with me and I will give you a fresh debt and I will tear out of the book the page which shows your old debt. If any one asks where you have been, or what you have done, I will tell them that an evil spirit captured you and took you off and that I went after you and killed the bad spirit and brought you back with me.

“You can go to the fort and get a new gun and a new knife, and blankets and tea and sugar and clothes so that you will be warm and dry and have a full belly and smoke a pipe again. And you can see the other Indians at the fort and laugh and talk with them and have a good time, and find a new squaw and have a camp and more children.”

Solomon Moses jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing, his face distorted with rage. Phil saw his mistake instantly. His eloquence had carried him too far. He had touched the two things that routed his captor’s sanity.

“I had a good squaw!” the Indian cried, fiercely. “I had a camp and fine children. I had tea and sugar and a new gun and tobacco. And the Company killed my squaw and my children and took everything from me, and the Company will pay. You will starve.”

As he danced in anger beside the fire his head struck a piece of meat that hung from one of the poles. He glanced up at it. In that moment his frenzy vanished to leave him in the grip of another passion. He grasped the meat hungrily, though he had just awakened from the sleep induced by his last gorge, and began to devour it as if he were starving.

Phil was fascinated by the spectacle. The man appeared to be famished, and he tore and gulped great strips and chunks of meat. That stoicism which only the Indian can assume was gone. The wild light of the day before reappeared in his eyes. His features became bestial. He was insane with the fear of hunger.

Phil sank back hopelessly. Arguments would be worthless now. The man had been unbalanced by his experience of two years before and never could be counted upon so long as the sight or mention of food would upset his mind in this fashion. The prestige of the Company, the superior mental power of a white man, could not avail against an irrational passion.

The meat devoured, Solomon Moses dropped on to the pile of skins and furs and was instantly asleep. As Phil looked at the black grease-smeared face, the great, hairy, paw-like hands, the primitive clothing of half-tanned pelts, he was seized with sudden anger at the thought of being in the power of such a creature. He, an intelligent white man with a trained mind and controlled passions, the plaything of this savage, hare-brained brute! In sudden exasperation and revolt he turned and twisted and tugged at his bonds.

His struggle ceased almost immediately when he realized that he was only reducing himself to the untamed level of Solomon Moses. If he had this vaunted superiority, the gift of civilization, why not make it effective? Why should not his superior mentality prevail over what was only brute cunning?

He sat up to be nearer the slowly dying fire and began to go over the situation point by point. While the Indian lay in a stupor he must free himself from the thongs and the chain. It was a long time since he had eaten. He could live for many days without food but another freezing such as he had suffered while the Indian was asleep before and his strength might be depleted to the point where freedom from his bonds would be only a mockery.

But try and scheme as he did, Phil was unable to loosen a knot. He could not reach one with his fingers, and there was no rough surface of any kind near him against which he could wear the strips of leather. And always he was confronted with the knowledge that, once his hands were free, he still had the problem of his chain-bound ankles. He could not walk with his feet tied so closely together, and he did not believe he could ever unloosen the tangled knots.

Still, only through freeing his hands was there any hope. He twisted on to his side until he could reach the belt about his body with the forefinger of his right hand. It was only a leather thong, an inch wide, and he began to scratch and scratch. If he could wear it through he could get his hands together and the knots that held them would be easy.

The fire went out and the cold was intense. His hands became numb, and he shivered uncontrollably. In one of these spasms he dug against the tight strap with his nail and broke it off in the quick. Immediately Phil turned over to make the same attempt with his other forefinger. But there the thong was a little shorter and he could not reach.

He bent his head in a vain effort to reach the belt with his teeth. He thrust aside all the skins upon which he lay, thinking he could wear through the belt by rubbing it against the frozen ground. But the strap had been tied tightly so that it was protected by his thick clothing and he could not touch it to the earth.

By the time Phil had abandoned this effort he was so numb with cold he was unable to do anything more. As best he could he scraped the skins back beneath him and drew others over him. Shivering, numbed, half conscious, he saw the dawn of the second day come, but before it was full daylight he had succumbed.

Again Phil was wakened by the shooting, twitching pains of warming muscles. He opened his eyes to see Solomon Moses once more sitting on the other side of a roaring fire. Only this time there was no friendly little smile for the prisoner. Instead, the man seemed not to have recovered from his mania. He glared through the smoke at his prisoner and when he saw Phil's painful movements he laughed wildly.

"My squaw lay in the wigwam without a fire," he chuckled. "She was too weak to go out for wood, and the children were beside her, dying of the cold and the hunger."

He sprang to his feet, picked up a piece of meat and held it temptingly a few inches from Phil's mouth. He took a knife from the mass of skins behind him and made a motion as if to sever his prisoner's bonds. When he saw the sudden gleam in Phil's eyes aroused by the sight of a cutting instrument he thrust it into the ground on his side of the fire, out of the white man's reach, but where he could always see it.

The spirit of torture aroused, he took small pieces of meat and hung them from the wigwam-poles above Phil's head and high enough so that there was no possibility of his ever reaching them. He set another piece beside the knife and so close to the fire it began to crinkle and sizzle in the heat, filling the wigwam with an odour that was maddening to Phil. He could not help but sniff hungrily, and Solomon saw him and grinned delightedly.

The Indian began at once a search for more meat. He tumbled back the pile of skins, rolling pieces of bone on the ground beside the fire. He pawed these over, ribs, shoulder-blades, long thigh-bones, some of them cracked and splintered. But he did not find more meat. He stood up, looked around the wigwam and then at his prisoner.

"The caribou do not come," he said, vacantly. "I will go out and find them. In ten days I will return."

"No!" cried Phil, involuntarily. "I'll freeze to death!"

It seemed to arouse Solomon from his sudden trance, but the demoniacal glitter was still in his eyes when he said:

"No, you will not freeze. I will return to build up the fire before the cold reaches your heart. It is not the cold but the hunger that will tear out your heart and leave you like the pieces of ice on the shore of the sea. You will starve but I must eat. I must have much meat. There is plenty at my other camp, and I will go for it. It is far, but I will be back before the cold reaches your heart. And while I am going I will leave these to keep you company," and he pointed at the small swinging pieces of meat and at the knife thrust into the ground beside the fire.

For an instant he seemed to be gauging Phil's bonds and the distance from the knife. Then he laughed.

"Maybe you can get the knife," he said. "I will let you try. But even if you did," and he pointed to the chain and chuckled, proudly, "I found the white man's leather and it can not be broken. With it on you can not go far."

He went out and Phil heard him take his toboggan from where it hung in a tree. He heard the crunch of his snowshoes as Solomon hurried away, and in a few moments there was no sound except the occasional crackling of the dying fire.

For a long time Phil lay there, slowly working his legs and arms until the sharp pains began to diminish and he had better use of his muscles. He was weak from exposure and hunger, yet his spirit had been fired by the absence of the crazed Solomon, while the sight of the knife was inspiring rather than tantalizing. It was out of his reach, and yet he knew that he must get it, that ultimately he would, and he began to plan.

Phil saw at once that he would have to wait until the fire had burned out and no coals were left. The knife was directly across the blaze. It appeared to be hopelessly beyond reach, but there was the possibility that, by tugging and turning, he could reach it with his mouth. His body was not restrained

from the waist up, and he need only fall across the fire to bring his face close to the blade.

Impatiently he watched the flame die down, saw the bright embers turn to gray and crumble. The cold was still intense but he did not feel it. He tried to be calm and yet every little while he cursed the coals that still glowed between him and the knife.

Then, struck with a sudden idea, he turned quickly on his side, caught up a piece of untanned caribou hide with his teeth, and with a jerk of his head flung it over the fire. Exultantly he sat up, worked over as near to the knife as possible, and then threw himself out toward it.

Instantly the door of the wigwam was darkened, the low shelter shook with peals of demoniacal laughter, and a black, hairy hand snatched the blade past Phil's nose. Again there was a wild laugh and Phil saw Solomon Moses running out of the wigwam waving the knife above his head and shrieking like a fiend.

With difficulty Phil drew himself back from the smoking hide and lay listening to the Indian as he went farther and farther away. At last there was silence, and then from a distance came the old familiar howl that had made many a night hideous at Fort Dease. After a minute it came again, still more distant. The man really was going away. In his absence there was still a chance to escape.

Phil looked at the hole the blade had made in the ground, cursing because it was not still there. It had been almost within his grasp. Solomon Moses could not have thought of a greater act of torture than the one he had just perpetrated.

And then Phil saw something that brought him up to a sitting position with a jerk. Beside where the knife had been thrust into the ground was a long, sharp splinter of the thigh-bone of a caribou. With it any piece of leather could be sawed through. With it he could free himself in five minutes.

Recklessly he threw himself out on to the burning hide over the coals, stretched his head as far as he could and opened his mouth. The bone was two inches beyond.

He crawled back and threw himself out again, extending his body to the utmost, only to have his lips still an inch from the sliver of bone. Again and again he tried it, until at last he was so exhausted he could not come within three inches.

For a time he rested. Then he began to experiment with different positions. He worked slowly now, and carefully, but not once was he able to better his second attempt. An inch still intervened between his lips and the bone.

As Phil lay resting from his exertions, studying the piece of bone that had so accidentally tumbled to its aggravating position, the cold struck in and he shivered. Without the bone he could not get free. And if he did not liberate himself before Solomon's return there was no hope. As he lay there panting, the steam arose from his nose and mouth in regular puffs. Phil watched it absently and then suddenly sat upright. He stared at the bone for an instant and then with a contented smile lay down and covered himself as best he could with the skins behind him.

Quite patiently he waited an hour and then another, until the bitter cold had completely chilled everything in the wigwam. At last, stiff and numb, he sat up, worked over toward the fire as far as he could, threw himself across the now dead ashes, craned his neck to the limit, and then deliberately thrust out his tongue until the tip touched the cold bone. After holding it there for several seconds he began to draw it in. Slowly the bone followed until with a hungry snap Phil caught it between his teeth.

There was a sharp pain in his tongue as the skin which had been frozen to the bone was wrenched loose, but he only grinned and bent his head until his right hand had clasped the splinter. In less than two minutes the thongs had been cut and he was standing up, bound only by the chain about his ankles.

CHAPTER XII

PHIL REFUSES HELP

PHIL had some matches in a trousers pocket and his first act was to start a fire. There were only a few sticks of wood in the wigwam, but he warmed himself as best he could with these and then began to examine the chain that bound his ankles together.

As he had expected, the knots were hopeless. The peculiar shape and size of the links lent themselves to quick bends and an inextricable tangle. The metal chilled his fingers until they were numb and useless. And then luck came to his aid.

Phil knew that the bit of a steel axe would break in cold weather on striking a hard knot. He did not know that most chain is made of wrought iron, not steel. This particular bit of chain, which Solomon Moses had picked up one night at Fort Dease, happened to be steel. Phil did not know this, and he was too ignorant of metals to find out. But there were several rocks inside the wigwam, loosened from the soil by the fire, and in a moment he was sitting on the ground, one stone between his ankles and beneath the chain, and the other poised in both hands above it. He brought it down once over a link and shattered it into three pieces.

Phil kicked his feet far apart with a shout of triumph.

In five minutes he had selected a pair of worn fur mittens and a long skin coat from the mass of half-tanned pelts on which Solomon Moses had slept, had set a piece of meat near the fire to thaw, and had made a pack of all the available skins that would serve as a sleeping-robe. In the centre of the pack he placed the few small pieces of frozen caribou flesh that the Indian had hung about the wigwam to tantalize his prisoner.

Alternately gnawing and tearing at the melted sides and placing the meat near the fire to thaw again, Phil managed to consume between three or four pounds in half an hour. Then he swung the pack over one shoulder and left the wigwam.

Two trails led from the door. He knew he had been brought in on that from the left. He knew that Solomon Moses had departed on the other. There was no chance for a mistake and at once he started off on the trail to the left.

But as he walked on beneath the small spruce his courage began to fail. He was sure that he was more than one hundred miles from Fort Dease. Otherwise there could be no timber. With the chain clanking about his ankles, with his meagre supply of meat, without snowshoes if a storm should come, without any knowledge of where he was, the situation was desperate. The extreme exaltation aroused by regaining his liberty was too great, however, to permit Phil to remain disheartened.

“It’s make it or starve,” he said aloud, and then he added, confidently — “And if it doesn’t snow to cover up the trail I’ll make it.”

He walked on rapidly, for his circulation was still sluggish, but one hundred yards from the wigwam he halted in amazement. He was out of the forest, out on the big barren waste that bordered the bay, and less than a mile in front of him was the shore of the inland sea itself.

“I thought it was funny that Indian could have dragged me a hundred miles when I figured it was no more than thirty!” he exclaimed aloud. “But what on earth are trees doing down here?”

He went on and after a quarter of a mile looked back to see that he had been held prisoner in a small patch of stunted spruce that had the appearance of an island in the vast, white desert.

“Probably was an island in the bay when the shore was a hundred miles farther back,” Phil thought as he started on. “And it’s probably a few million years older than the land around it.”

As he approached the shore he realized that a serious problem must be solved at once. When Solomon Moses had spun the toboggan around and around and had covered Phil’s face with a piece of leather, he had made it impossible for his prisoner to know whether he had been carried southeast or northwest from Fort Dease. It was equally impossible for Phil to know now whether he was northwest or southeast of the fort. He knew the ice on the bay, or the snow where it had not been swept off by the wind, would not show a mark of the toboggan.

“It’s an even chance either way,” he thought as he struck the shore ice and looked first one way and then the other. “I suppose I’m lucky to have the possibilities equal.”

In the old days he would have started off at once, gladly availing himself of a situation of even chances. Now the thought of Joyce alone at Fort Dease made him hesitate and brought an end to his exhilaration. He must not take even a half chance in the matter. To reach and protect Joyce, to save Fort Dease to the Hudson's Bay Company, he must be absolutely certain.

Standing there, he studied the situation. Not a factor which might help him to determine directions was forgotten. He reviewed everything that had happened since Solomon Moses had first left the prints of his bare feet in the mud the previous fall. He recalled everything he had heard about the Indian, all Sandy had told him and all that he knew of the district. He analyzed each of the cunning tricks Solomon had employed, deducted the entire life of the monomaniac in the last two years.

At the end two things were fixed in his mind. The weeteego had always howled from the marshes off the south of Fort Dease. The weird wails had grown faint always in that same direction. But Solomon had always been careful to come only when a storm would cover his tracks. He had never overlooked anything to keep his identity and his whereabouts a secret. Therefore, his leaving always in the one direction was a blind.

Secondly, before Solomon's family had been wiped out by starvation he had hunted near Berens River. It had been his father's hunting territory. Naturally, he would remain there, for no one would suspect his presence in it, and no one would ever cross it. Further, he would have to live in the timber country far to the south or west to get food. The camp in the island of spruce was only a temporary refuge from which he had carried on his operations against Fort Dease. The trail by which he had departed that morning had led toward the west, toward Berens River.

Instantly the whole thing became clear to Phil. The island of spruce was northwest of Fort Dease. It was the only logical place for Solomon's camp. With perfect confidence Phil turned along the shore to the southeast.

Through the long hours of the night he did not stop. Walking as fast as he could, often breaking into the easy, shuffling gait of the dog driver, he kept on. But the pace could not last. The chain knotted at each ankle became more and more of a hindrance. It began to chafe his legs as the knots swung back and forth with each step. In time, as Phil's knees grew weary, the unaccustomed weight served to throw him off his balance and he stumbled over the uneven surface in the dark.

The exhilaration with which he had started, even though it were heightened by his certainty that he was taking the right direction, was not

sufficient to spur cramped, sore, tired muscles through many miles. By midnight his pace had slowed down to a bare two miles an hour. By four o'clock in the morning it was with difficulty that he kept moving at all.

There have been many instances of men continuing to travel when strength seems completely exhausted, and Phil furnished still another. He was carried on by the desire to live, by the desire to reach Joyce, by the desire to serve the Company. He cursed the chain as he stumbled forward. He cursed his own physical weakness. He cursed Solomon Moses. He cursed Wickson. And because the cursing seemed to help, he cursed again and again. It took his mind off his physical self, and he went back so far as his schooldays and cursed a weazened, sour, uninspiring little teacher who had never done anything more than make one sarcastic remark relative to Phil's lack of proficiency in mathematics.

And, still cursing, he came to the mouth of Cut-Bank River and Fort Dease. At the first indication of dawn—for days and nights would soon be of equal length—he saw the squat, desolate, insignificant little buildings perched on the edge of the stream, but to him there never was a more welcome sight. Forgetting the chains, he went quickly up the slope, through the side gate and across to the kitchen door.

There was no light, but he had not expected one. Joyce was asleep but she must be wakened. As he neared the door he called:

“Joyce! Oh, Joyce!”

He paused outside to listen. There was no answer.

“Joyce!” he repeated. “Wake up! I'm back!”

Still there was no sound from his bedroom and anxiously he opened the door and entered. He struck a match, but there was no lamp in the kitchen, and he clanked across the floor and into the living room.

“Joyce!” he called again. “Joyce! Are you here?”

The place was deathly still as he stared about the room. Then the match burned his fingers. He struck another and went forward to the table. As it flared up and he was about to lift the chimney from the lamp he saw the long butcher-knife from the kitchen sticking straight up in the reading-table and squarely in the centre of several sheets of paper. His first glance took in the line at the top, in a hand unmistakably feminine:

To whomsoever comes to Fort Dease and finds this:

His fingers trembling from sudden fear, Phil touched the match to the wick, replaced the chimney and then began to read:

To whomsoever comes to Fort Dease and finds this: I, Joyce Plummer, until recently serving as governess to the children of Mr. Osborne, manager of the Hudson's Bay Company post at Savant House, arrived at Fort Dease on the first day of March, having travelled the last two days alone because the two Indians who came with me refused to go farther on the grounds that a weeteego, or some form of evil spirit, haunted Fort Dease.

Less than a quarter of a mile from the fort, and when it was dark and storming very hard, I heard this weeteego shrieking and the next moment it almost ran into me, turning off when it saw me and my dog-team and howling as it ran. I called, and was answered by Mr. Philip Boynton, manager of Fort Dease, who was pursuing the weeteego after it had attempted to enter the dwelling house. Mr. Boynton heard me and helped me reach the fort.

I wish to say here that I am engaged to be married to Mr. Boynton and that I made the journey to Fort Dease from Savant House because I believed that he was in danger. This belief was not shared by any one else, despite the fact that the former manager had been taken out with an unsound mind because of his experiences here and the additional fact that Mr. Boynton's servant, Sandy Thunder, deserted him in November, leaving him alone at the fort until my arrival.

I wish to state further that I found Mr. Boynton nearly exhausted, both nervously and physically, by his experiences of the winter and that, though he did not wish to tell me at first, he was practically in a state of siege. On several occasions the weeteego, as I call it, has gained entrance to the dwelling house, once being driven off only after a terrible struggle. It always came when there was a big storm so that it could not be traced. It never attempted to steal anything. Mr. Boynton had no

knowledge of what or who it could be, whether mentally unsound, of criminal intent, white or red. Three times Mr. Boynton fired at it while it was trying to open the kitchen door, as the door will show.

Soon after my arrival the night of March first, the storm ceased and the sky became clear and the temperature very low. Mr. Boynton did not expect an attack but nevertheless he barricaded the kitchen door and, though he told me he would sleep in the living room, he did not lie down but sat up on the couch. I wakened in the night and went out and saw that he had gone to sleep and fallen over, and I laid a blanket over him.

When I wakened again it was broad daylight. I thought that strange, as we were to start early that morning for Mr. Lowry's nearest outpost as Mr. Boynton had to round up his hunters, all of whom, with about twenty thousand dollars' worth of Company goods, were not intending to return to Fort Dease but were going with their fur to the opposition up the shore of the bay.

I called his name, but there was no answer, so I dressed and went out. The kitchen door was open and a window had been taken out, sash and all. Outside in the fresh snow were tracks that told unmistakably that the weeteego had come in the night, had made Mr. Boynton prisoner and had carried him away on a toboggan. I followed the toboggan track down to the shore of the bay. There was no sign there on the hard crust and ice to tell in which direction he had been taken. I could only see, by the tracks at the house, that the weeteego had no dogs but had drawn his toboggan himself, and I knew therefore, that he could not have gone very far.

I returned to the dwelling house, started a fire for breakfast and have written this. After I have eaten I will hitch up the dogs and start northwest along the shore and try to see where Mr. Boynton has been taken, and, if possible, set him free.

Here Joyce signed her name, but there was more beneath it:

March third: I followed the shore toward the northwest all yesterday but could not see a sign of any one having travelled that way nor of any one having left the ice to go on to the shore. I concluded that I had taken the wrong direction and the next day returned to Fort Dease. To-morrow morning I will start along the shore to the southeast and will keep on until I find a trace of him.

For a full minute Phil did not move. He had been leaning with both hands on the table, his head bent forward, and it sank still lower as he stared at the last sheet. Joyce, out there on the shore ice, going farther and farther away, even then probably breaking camp and pressing on in search of him! Joyce, a long day ahead of him, the certain victim of the first storm that would sweep down the coast! No shelter, no fuel, nothing to guide her if the thick snow should come! A team of half-wild dogs that might even now have run away from her, leaving her without food or robes!

Slowly, absently, he rearranged the sheets of paper, thrust the knife back into the hole it had made and pressed it into the table. Listlessly he turned away, and then with a leap that carried him half way to the door he started for the kitchen and began building a fire. He rushed outside and filled a pail with snow and set it on the stove and then started a fire in the living room stove. Back in the kitchen again he searched in the cupboard and found a file he had used to sharpen the butcher-knife. He hurried back to the living room and, seated on the floor beside the now roaring heater, he began sawing away at a link of the chain around one ankle.

For an hour and a half Phil filed and cooked and filed and ate, and when he had finished eating he filed until his hands were cramped and his arms ached. But at last both legs were free.

An additional half-hour was necessary for his preparations. He had thrown off the malodorous skins he had worn from Solomon Moses' camp and now he clad himself in his own winter costume. He gathered food and some fuel, a pail and two rabbitskin blankets and lashed them all on a small toboggan which had been hanging in the trade shop. He tied his snowshoes on top and then searched the house for his rifle. When he did not find it he decided that Joyce must have taken it. So he got between the traces, started down the slope to the shore ice and set off at a trot toward the southeast.

The monotony of travel brought opportunity for reflection. The first thing that occurred to him was his failure to add a postscript to Joyce's message. Otherwise, any one coming the next summer would never learn

what had happened to him. It was not of sufficient importance even to consider turning back, however, and he went on, his mind busy with the possibilities of catching Joyce.

Phil admitted readily to himself that the situation was about as hopeless as had been his own position when lying prisoner in Solomon Moses' camp. This was the fourth day of clear, fair weather. The temperature was fifty or more below each night, but that was nothing compared to the storms that generally sweep the coast. With no wind a man can survive. With a blizzard howling down across the six or seven hundred miles of unobstructed bay, with no shelter within a hundred miles, with no fuel, a Northman would have a difficult time of it. Joyce would be easy prey, while he, on the verge of exhaustion, could not fare better.

All day as he hurried on he watched the sky as much as the ice ahead of him. Granted that he could keep on, granted that the good weather held, he could not hope to overtake Joyce until two days and two nights had passed. Then, even if she still had the dogs, a day and night at least would be required for the return journey. And to expect seven days without a storm! It was preposterous.

Despite the hopelessness of it, despite the fear that grew and grew, despite his own weariness and the slower and slower pace, Phil kept doggedly at it until nearly dark. Then he stopped only long enough to get a bite to eat. Night found him again plodding on, keeping at the edge of the hard going, watching always, to the right, the left and ahead, even stopping occasionally to call.

Midnight came and he began to debate with himself the advisability of resting until morning. But always the thought that when morning came Joyce would be resuming her journey ahead of him brought a new resolution.

Later he began to consider whether he should not go on without his toboggan. It was becoming unbearably heavy. And Joyce had surely taken plenty of food and robes. Any girl who would have the courage to undertake such a journey would have brains enough to go well provided when she had dogs to pull all she needed. Then the thought would come: "What if the dogs ran away with the toboggan and left her?" He would stumble on, tugging harder at his load.

Under such conditions it is invariably the case that a man's mind goes first. When that vague thing called a spirit maintains its relentless urging, when muscles continue to contract long after the last reserve of power seems

to have been tapped, visions come, strange, vague, oppressive thoughts that flit and flare and mock and madden.

They came to Phil, intermittently at first, and he brought all his mental energy to bear in an attempt to fight them off. He knew too well that they would only hasten the end, that in their grip he might wander out to sea on the ice or pass Joyce on the shore.

But they came back to taunt him. Once they made him see Joyce just ahead and he ran forward, crying her name, until he tripped and fell and recovered his senses. Once he heard the yelp of her dogs, her dogs running away, and he shouted hoarse commands.

Then, so clearly it startled him, he heard the tinkle of a sleigh-bell. It stopped him short, and he looked eagerly behind and on each side. He hesitated, then laughed bitterly and started on. Again he heard the bell. He knew it was a delusion, but he stopped again.

The tinkle came once more, from the rear, and he wheeled about. As he stood there, swaying with weakness, he saw a dark object on the ice rushing toward him. But he thought it only another delusion and turned to start on again.

The bell sounded nearer, but he ignored it.

“Joyce! Joyce!” came in a great voice from behind him. “Joyce! Wait! I’m coming!”

Phil wheeled, every nerve tense, the delusions scattered by the reality of that voice, by the knowledge of whose voice it was. As he stood there a dog-team dashed up and was halted at his side. A man came running forward to peer into his face.

“Damn you, Wickson!” Phil cried. “Go back! Keep out! You started this but you can’t see the finish.”

CHAPTER XIII

“SHE DID THAT! TO ME!”

PHIL drew back his right fist, swung viciously at Wickson's face, missed, whirled himself off his feet and sprawled out on the ice.

He did not get up. The sudden, excessive effort had sapped the last of his strength. The quick blaze of anger had completed the work of exposure, anxiety, loss of sleep and terrific exertion.

When he recovered consciousness day had come and he was being bumped along as he had been when Solomon Moses had carried him away. For a moment he believed that he was again in the Indian's power.

But there was no covering over his face. Instead of the soft, padding shuffle of Solomon's hairy boots there came the quick, scratching sound of many small feet. He was only half reclining, and he lifted his head to see five weary dogs between the traces and at their head the vigorous, swiftly, moving figure of John Wickson.

For a time he was content to lie where he was. He did not let the district manager know that he was awake, but after a few minutes Wickson turned and saw that Phil's eyes were open. Immediately he halted the team and walked back.

“We'd better have something to eat,” he said as he began to undo the lashings that held Phil to the toboggan. “I've been waiting until you came to. Feel any better?”

“A little.”

Wickson spread some robes on the ice.

“Lie down on these,” he commanded, “while I get a lunch. Guess we won't bother with tea. We may need the wood later. Looks like a storm.”

Phil did not comment while Wickson drew some frozen bannock and meat from his grub-box. The mention of a storm had brought back with added force the seriousness of Joyce's predicament. He watched the sky

anxiously, noted the direction of the wind, argued with his better judgment that the storm would not strike before noon.

He was hungry, too, and when Wickson handed him his portion of frozen food he began to gnaw at it as voraciously as had Solomon Moses. After the meal the district manager asked his first question.

“How did you get loose? Kill him?”

“No. He went away and I cut the straps.”

“Couldn’t get the chains off, eh?”

“You saw them at the fort!”

“Yes. Didn’t see any signs of Miss Plummer on your way back?”

“No. I travelled in the night. She probably turned back before she got as far as I was.”

“Well, we mustn’t lose any time now. Want me to tie you on?”

“No, I can stick.”

Phil wrapped the robes about him and sat down on the toboggan, leaning back against the load. Wickson went to the head of the team and started on at once. For an hour he did not falter. Then he called back, only half turning his head:

“I think I see her.”

Wickson, because he was on his feet, had the larger horizon, and it was some time before Phil, too, saw a dark spot on the ice ahead of them.

“Can you make her out?” he demanded.

“Not yet.”

After a while Wickson called back again:

“She’s not there. It’s only the dogs, all tangled in a bunch.”

Phil raised himself to get a better view. The thing he had feared had happened. Joyce might still be many miles away, more miles than they could cover before the storm struck them. The wind was gaining in force constantly and he could feel the cold through his robes. If Joyce had been thrown and hurt when her team broke away, if she had been left lying on the ice, she would be dead if they did reach her.

Wickson had increased his pace and in fifteen minutes he halted the team fifty yards from the dogs ahead of them. Phil got to his feet to look. Perhaps

Joyce lay on the other side of the little knot of dogs.

Wickson was already half way there, and Phil tipped over the toboggan on which he had been riding and his own, which Wickson had tied at the rear. The team thus anchored, he ran ahead.

“Got loose this morning probably when she was hitching them up,” commented the district manager, who was already busy untangling the harness. “You can see they weren’t hitched to the toboggan. They look in good shape, so she probably fed them last night. And she can’t be many miles ahead, for these fellows couldn’t have gone far without getting in a mess like this.”

Phil did not comment. He had seen everything that Wickson had. He had also seen the first driving flakes of the storm. To the north a white curtain shut out the sky and the ice, and he wheeled anxiously toward the southeast for a last look before his view would be cut off in that direction. But nowhere was the gray surface of the land and sea broken by the tiniest point of black.

Phil’s eyes became blurred. Somewhere down there, perhaps injured, perhaps now dead, perhaps struggling helplessly on in search of him, was Joyce. Suddenly he was crazed by the thought of it. The very impotency of any human agency in the face of nature as she was about to manifest herself, the monstrous injustice of Joyce’s plight, the horrible death that was inevitably hers, all served to bring a blinding, uncontrollable rage.

His fists clenched, he wheeled upon Wickson, who was bending over a twisted trace. He took a step forward, then stopped.

“Wickson,” he said, “look here.”

The district manager whirled quickly, for, though Phil had spoken quietly, there was a tense unnatural note in his voice.

“I’m going on, even if there isn’t a chance,” Phil continued. “I’ve got to go on. I’ve got to make sure. You go back.”

“I won’t do anything of the sort.”

“You will, Wickson. Because, if you come with me, and we find her, find her too late, or if we don’t find her at all, I’m going to kill you. You’d better go now while you have the chance.”

If Phil had spoken wildly, had shouted or cursed, Wickson would have ignored him. But he was deadly quiet, deadly in earnest, and there was no escaping the fact that he meant every word he said.

“You started all this, Wickson,” Phil continued. “If she is dead it is you that killed her and I’ll kill you. You call yourself a Hudson’s Bay man. You pose as a faithful servant of the Company. But there never was a man in the service who betrayed the Company to help himself as you have done. There have been cowards and thieves and crooks, but not one of them ever left a Company man to die when they might have sent help, or let a woman go out and do what the Company should have done. The Company has always protected its men, and they have always protected each other, have always stood together. But you, to get me out of the way, to get what you thought would be a clear field, risked everything except your own hide.

“But you’re going to be paid for it. After this storm I’ll kill you if you’re here. And if you get back, and I get back, I’ll follow you until I find you, and then I’ll kill you.”

As the first rushing, driving, stinging blast of the storm struck them the two men stood facing each other. Phil stared the hatred that had not been in his voice, but Wickson seemed not to have heard. He looked at Phil’s face, absently, as if his thoughts were elsewhere.

“I believe you would,” he said at last. “But we’ve got to get started.”

Phil reached for the collar of Joyce’s leader and dragged the team back to his own toboggan. He hooked up the traces, saw that his load was secure, and spoke sharply to the dogs.

“Get on your toboggan,” commanded Wickson, gruffly, as he ran up and tied a line to the collar of Phil’s leader and made him fast to the rear of his own sleigh.

“Untie that dog!” Phil cried as he sprang forward. “You heard what I said!”

“Get on your toboggan,” repeated the district manager. “You’re in no shape to travel. And don’t waste time.”

Phil stepped close to Wickson and stared at him.

“You heard what I said?”

“Yes, but get on your toboggan. Hurry man! There’s a chance.”

His last word brought Phil to a realization of the selfishness of his hatred. There was a chance though it were only one in a million, but as long as that chance existed other things must wait.

“Go on!” he exclaimed as he turned back to his toboggan. Half way he wheeled and shouted:

“But what I said still holds!”

Wickson nodded as he ran to the head of his team and started on down the shore.

For an hour they travelled thus, each man straining his eyes in an effort to pierce the gray veil that surrounded them. Phil had an unstable seat on his little toboggan, and the wind began to find crevices through which it reached his body. At last when he was so stiff that he could no longer hang on he rolled off, got to his feet, and ran ahead until he was beside Wickson.

“This is getting too thick,” he panted. “I’ll take my team and stay close inshore, and you take the other and keep a little farther out. We might pass her this way.”

“If you can do it,” said Wickson. “But don’t get out of sight or we’ll never find each other.”

He stopped the dogs and Phil untied his leader.

“Keep me in sight all the time,” cautioned Wickson as they started.

For another hour they went on, always at a trot, always searching the ice and the low, level shore, Phil, because he had the inside course, and because his anxiety was so great, glanced only seldom toward the other dog-team. Sometimes it disappeared in a thickening burst of the storm. Sometimes it was ahead, sometimes behind, and when it stopped short he did not know but pressed on.

For Wickson had found Joyce. Stumbling blindly along in the smother, far out from shore, he had caught a glimpse of her on his left and had wheeled immediately. When he drew up beside her he glanced back and saw Phil’s team disappear in the gray curtain down the wind.

“You!” cried Joyce when she saw who it was.

Wickson looked down at the face framed by the hood of dark fur, at the eyes lighted by over-whelming relief. He trembled when she reached out and grasped his hand and smiled up at him, and at once he forgot everything, everything except the presence of this woman there beside him, the fact that he had found her, that he could save her, that . . .

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. Phil had disappeared in the storm down the shore, was going on and on. There would be only one result. There was nothing back there at Fort Dease to tell.

There was no one within two hundred miles, no one except him and this woman. His fierce determination to have her overpowered all else.

“Joyce!” he cried, sweeping his arms about her. “Now you’re mine! Now!”

Instantly a small, mittened fist struck the white patch from his chin where the skin had frozen and left a red smear across his face. Another fist dug into his stomach so wickedly that he gasped for breath and loosened the grip of his arms.

“You beast!” cried Joyce as she sprang free. “You sent him up here to this. You would not help him, and now, when he may be dying just ahead, you stand here and say ‘mine.’”

“Yours! What is yours? You have nothing that’s decent or honest. You have the soul of a snake, and the heart of one, and the ways of one. You have the body of a big, strong, brave man, and you have instincts that would shame a wolf.

“You call yourself a Hudson’s Bay man, but there isn’t a sleigh-dog at any post that isn’t a better servant of the Company. You would wreck the Company to gain your own ends. You would sacrifice good men.

“Yours!” Joyce fairly screamed in the excess of her passion. “I’ll show you if I’m yours! Take your dogs! Go back with them! I’ll go on and find him, and even failure and cold and hunger and the end will bring greater happiness than you could give me in a thousand years.”

She turned abruptly and started off, walking rapidly down the wind toward the shore.

Wickson stared at her as he had stared at Phil two hours before. For a moment he was perplexed, mystified. Then came a quick flash of anger, anger that was directed at the back of the girl now half enveloped in the curtain of the storm.

“And she did that! To me!” he exclaimed, fiercely.

He spoke to his dogs and started after Joyce in his long, easy, swift, swinging lope. As she heard his approach she whirled to face him.

“Get on the toboggan,” he commanded, gruffly, as he stopped the team.

“I won’t!”

He picked her up, carried her back, and dropped her heavily on the top of the load.

“Hang on,” he said as he turned away. “Boynton is just ahead somewhere. We’ve got to hurry.”

He started forward on the run, veering in toward shore and calling to his dogs. In a moment the team was galloping to keep up with him.

Wickson’s anger increased as he ran, and he was alert for the first sign of the team and its driver somewhere ahead of him in the storm. He had suddenly discovered that he must catch Phil, that he must find him before it was too late, that nothing else mattered.

It was not a sudden solicitude for Phil’s safety that drove him on. Phil, as had always been the case with Wickson, was merely a means to an end, and now Wickson desired his safety, not for Phil’s sake, but for his own.

“And she did that! To me!” he repeated fiercely to himself again and again, and each time he ran faster.

For Wickson had been stung as he never had been before. Not by what Joyce had said to him, not by what Phil had threatened, but by his own treachery, by what he had done to himself. It was his pride that had been injured, and his anger was the greater because he himself had delivered the blow. At first that anger had been directed toward Joyce, but as his mind grasped all the facts she faded from his thoughts.

John Wickson had always been accustomed to winning. He never had known what failure might be. Success was a habit with him. In his own way he had been proud of this success, but as he ran on ahead of his dogs he saw that his pride was in himself, not in what he had accomplished. It was he, he alone with his power and his strength and his determination and his intellect that had carried him high in the North country. It was his greatest possession, this ability to win, not to win by any means, but to win solely through sheer strength of mind and of body.

Back there on the ice he had done something he had never done before, something he had never considered doing. He had abandoned his usual methods, he had mistrusted his own ability, he had descended to treachery to gain what he wanted. He was not afraid of Boynton, not afraid of his threat. He would delight in an equal combat. Yet he had taken the weakling’s way, had dodged a fight, had shown disrespect for his own power. To win this

woman he would have let Phil go on to perish instead of dragging him back and crushing him as he could.

The thought stung him on to a faster pace, to a greater desire to take him and Joyce back to Fort Dease, to reestablish the struggle on an even footing. Then, and he smiled grimly, he would win as he always had won, by the sheer strength of him.

Accordingly there was a certain exultation in his cry when he caught sight of a dim shadow ahead of him. In a moment he had dashed up to Phil's toboggan and stopped his team. With a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder, he sat down with his back to Joyce, staring ahead with a grim smile when he saw Phil dash past him, heard her low cry as she sprang to her feet.

Of what happened in the next forty-eight hours none of the three was ever able to recall anything except isolated incidents. All that time they lay wrapped in their robes, buried in the snow. The storm roared over their heads, never relaxing its vigilance, never missing an opportunity to swoop down and enter the smallest opening.

Each nursed a piece of frozen meat close to the body. When the surface was thawed they nibbled. After each short sleep they wakened to find several mouthfuls ready.

None knew what the others did. For the first twenty-four hours they did not care. Joyce had been exhausted by four days of steady travel. Phil had hardly been in fit shape to leave Fort Dease. Wickson had travelled a thousand miles since February first. He had ridden much of the way, but the two days before he had reached Fort Dease he had travelled alone, and for three days and two nights he had not stopped even to make a fire. Hard, unbreakable man that he was, he had reached the point where rest was more than welcome.

Trying as was the siege, each benefited by it. They were comparatively comfortable. Wickson had turned the toboggans on edge under a forming drift so that the storm defeated itself by continually adding to their covering. They derived nourishment from the meat, and they could sleep undisturbed.

The evening of the second day the storm blew out. The three emerged like polar bears, shaking off the snow. Wickson and Phil began at once to round up and harness the dogs. The toboggans were loaded, a comfortable place was made for Joyce on the larger one, and they were soon ready to start.

Little was said during the preparations. Phil, in answer to Joyce's questions, had outlined the story of his capture and explained the mystery of Solomon Moses. She told how she had lost her team in the morning and had abandoned the toboggan because she could not drag it.

Phil asked the district manager how he happened to arrive on the scene when he did.

"I got back to Savant House three weeks after Miss Plummer left," Wickson answered, simply. "I started after her at once. It was no trip for a woman. About fifty miles from Dease I met her Indians. Said they were afraid of a weeteego. Mine wouldn't go on, so I came alone. Found her note and saw where you had filed off the chains and knew you had got loose. I started less than ten hours after you did."

There was now no danger. By travelling all night and most of the next day they would reach Penitentiary Post, where they would have good food, shelter, a chance to rest. What would come afterward, they did not even plan. Each was still suffering from the lassitude which follows bodily exhaustion.

They travelled all night. At dawn they halted and built a fire. Stimulated by the hot, black tea, they decided to go on until they reached the fort. They were tired, but they would rather rest in bed than on the ice, would rather sit down to a table of steaming dishes than continue to gnaw frozen food.

They went on all day. Every hour Wickson and Phil changed places, one riding, the other going ahead, while occasionally Joyce ran beside the dogs to drive the numbness from her feet and the ache of the cold from between her shoulders.

When darkness came there was no sign of the fort. It meant two more hours at least, possibly three, with the dogs showing signs of the strain. But always there was the thought of warm beds, endless sleep, scalding tea, fried pork, sugar, hot bannock, possibly a tin of jam.

In those last hours it is doubtful if any of the three considered the real relationship that existed between them. Hatred and jealousy and fear and contempt, plan for the future, none of these could persist in the face of their purely physical desires.

Phil was in the lead when they reached the mouth of Cut-Bank River.

"We're there!" he called back to the others as he turned up the shore.

In a moment the snow forced a halt and he returned to the rear toboggan for his snowshoes. Wickson already had his on and had started forward.

“What’s that smell?” he demanded, suddenly, as he stopped and sniffed.

Phil looked up, inhaled the air.

“Someone’s there!” he cried. “They’ve started a fire in the dwelling house.”

He sprang after Wickson and the dogs toiled behind him in the deep snow of the slope.

“How far back is the fort?” asked Wickson, who was breaking out the fresh trail.

“Right at the top of the bank here,” answered Phil as he peered past the district manager into the darkness.

He stopped, stared for a moment, and then sprang on.

“Hurry up!” he called at Wickson’s back. “There’s been a fire! The dwelling house is gone!”

They had reached the top of the low bank and Wickson stopped at the corner of the picket fence. Phil ploughed up to his side. Before them was a white expanse broken only by the four sides of the inclosure. Dwelling house, trading shop, warehouse, servants’ house, Indian house, all were gone. Even the cache which Phil and Sandy had made was levelled.

CHAPTER XIV

PHIL'S PLANS AND WICKSON

STANDING side by side, the two men looked across the spot where Fort Dease had been. The space within the inclosure was perfectly level. The blanket of snow lay unwrinkled. The site of Penitentiary Post was as empty and as barren as the surrounding waste.

Because of their intimate knowledge of the Northland, Phil Boynton and John Wickson understood at once and perfectly the peril they faced, grasped instantly every detail of their problem. Neither minimized in his own mind the danger of the situation and yet neither spoke of it.

The North is a land of the unexpected, of the uncertain, and those who are of it know the infinite possibilities it holds for irregularity and variety. They come, in time, to treat the unusual as the usual, the extraordinary as the common-place, and to them there is nothing surprising, nothing disconcerting, nothing that completely dismays. Obstacles are inevitable. Their size and peculiarities only cause comment.

And so it was that Wickson said:

“Well, the woodpile wasn’t burned. We can have a warm camp to-night.”

“Which we’re tired enough to care more about than anything else,” added Phil as they turned back to bring up the dogs.

Half way they met Joyce floundering toward them through the deep snow.

“What has happened?” she asked, anxiously.

“The fort’s burned, every building of it,” Phil answered.

“The fort burned! Why, that means that we have no food, no — —”

She stopped, unable to go on and express in words what the situation would mean to them.

“Oh, we’ll get out somehow. We’ll have a good camp to-night. That’s all that any one cares about now. And when we are rested we’ll make plans.”

“It will be hardest on the dogs,” added Wickson. “They’ll miss a meal or two.”

There was no intention on the part of the men to deceive Joyce as to the true situation. She did not have the physical strength nor the skill of a man, but she had shown herself equal in spirit in the face of a much more perilous emergency, and they accorded this spirit its just respect.

It was this one thing, however, that dismayed Phil. Joyce was brave enough, but that very bravery and desire to do her share would only add to her torture. She would tax her strength too often. She would be forced to go on when her body was racked by every step. She would be cold and for days and days she would be hungry, starving at the end. And always there would be the possibility that her soft, round, pink body would become “hard and cold and white like the pieces of ice that stick up on the shore of the salt water.”

Phil’s concern for Joyce served only to strengthen his determination that they must get out, and as he drove his team into the inclosure his mind was busy with the problem.

First, they would have food for no more than two days when they would be ready to leave the site of Fort Dease. Fort Berens was more than a week’s journey to the northwest along the coast, a fuelless, hazardous trail. Two hundred miles to the west was the nearest outpost of the Company. But only an Indian could find it.

They were bound on one side by the bay and on the other by a wide strip of treeless, storm-swept, lifeless country. No food, no shelter, no fuel, no possibility of gaining any one of these—that was the situation.

In a surprisingly short time Wickson and Phil had taken care of the dogs and built a fire in the shelter of the big pile of wood. They started snow to melting for tea, cut some bacon and mixed a bannock. Little was said as they worked. All three were very tired, and because of their weariness they shivered even when close to the big fire.

The tea and the hot food accomplished wonders in reviving their spirits, however, and after the meal they became even cheerful. Enjoyment is largely a matter of contrast, and after the long, cold, weary days and nights on the shore ice, the shelter of the woodpile, the full stomachs and the roaring blaze brought a certain amount of contentment. For the first time the destruction of the fort was mentioned.

"There wasn't a fire in the place when I got here just before dark that night," Wickson said, "and I didn't stop to build one. After I read that note I started at once."

"Of course not," said Phil. "All the buildings wouldn't catch from one fire. There is only one answer to this. Solomon Moses got back to his camp down the shore, found I had escaped, and started after me. His life-work has been to starve a Hudson's Bay Company man because he believes the Company let his family starve two years ago. He knew that if he burned the post I couldn't get anything to eat and that I couldn't get out without food."

"But the thing's done," was the district manager's only comment, "and all we have to consider is getting out. That and getting supplies in here by summer so we can take care of the hunters."

"There won't be any hunters," Phil retorted. "That is, unless Solomon Moses is captured and the Indians rounded up before spring."

"But you can't do anything like that without food. We haven't enough to take us anywhere. Our best plan is to start for the nearest outpost to the west and travel the last of the way on nothing."

"And if we are lost or delayed by a storm what will we live on?" asked Phil.

"That's a chance we've got to take," answered Wickson, soberly.

"And in the meantime we leave Solomon Moses free to do what he wants to do. And when spring comes the Freetrader will have the hunters."

"You aren't suggesting that we eat what little food we have while we try to capture Solomon Moses?" asked Wickson. "Isn't it better to go out first, get food, and return?"

"It is if we were sure of getting out. But look here. You're a good man, Wickson. They say you can do most things that an Indian can do. But I don't think you can get across to the nearest outpost. I don't think you can find your way after that storm. And we've got to be sure when we start on our slim rations.

"Here's what I suggest. Solomon Moses left me at his camp down the shore to go after more meat. He probably brought in at least a hundred pounds. It started to snow right after he burned the post. He most likely went to that camp. We can go down there, surprise him, give him a running start, and then follow his trail to the timber country. We can use what meat he leaves at the camp until we get to the timber. There we will have a chance at

some caribou or find some hunter's camp, and Solomon will supply the guide we need."

"And if anything happens to lose us our guide before we get to the timber, or if we get there and can't get food?" asked Wickson, quietly.

"It's a chance we've got to take. At least we don't take so big a chance that way as to start to the nearest outpost without any guide and on short rations."

It was a plan which required daring and courage. Neither of the men lacked either. And Wickson had chafed inwardly at the necessity of leaving Fort Dease without doing anything to save the fur business for the Company. In either programme they faced death by starvation. But in Phil's plan there was the possibility of definite accomplishment. If successful, the reward of their toil, their privations, would be not only the saving of their own lives but the achievement of that which the Company had a right to expect of them.

Both men were silent for a moment. Then they looked up. The fire of courageous purpose leaped into their eyes simultaneously. Joyce, watching, was thrilled and glad at the same time. But when they spoke it was quietly, simply, as though over the decision of an ordinary day's work.

"You're right, Boynton. Your plan is best. How much food have we?"

"Enough for two days."

Wickson arose.

"I'm going to take a look around," he said as he walked out past the fire. "There may be something left, something we can use for dog food at least. We haven't a thing for them, and we can't go far without the dogs."

"Better wait until daylight," Phil suggested. "We won't be getting out of here to-morrow because we won't be fit to start."

"I want to know what we have to bank on before I go to sleep," was the answer, and Wickson walked off into the darkness.

As soon as they were alone Joyce leaned over and placed a hand on Phil's arm.

"I'm afraid," she whispered. "Must we stay with him? Isn't there some way to have Wickson go one way and us another?"

“Not with two days’ food,” laughed Phil. “But there is nothing to be afraid of. We’re in the same boat and we’ve got to stick together. Afterward we’ll have something to settle. But we’re neither of us fools enough to try to settle it here with this job before us.”

“But he will, Phil,” insisted Joyce. “That is just what I am afraid of. Things like this don’t frighten him. Out there on the ice that day he found me, in the face of everything, he made love to me. Said that I was his, that he had found me. He won’t stop at anything. Phil, I feel sure that he didn’t intend to tell me that you were near us, that he intended to let you go on in the storm looking for me.”

“Wickson wouldn’t do a thing like that. He’s a hard man, but he wouldn’t fight that way. This is the kind of a fight that you can’t understand. He understands and I understand. And I know that I can trust him to fight fair.”

“But you only look at it from a man’s stand-point, and as a man sees such things. A woman feels them, Phil, and I have felt all along that we can’t trust him. He didn’t play fair when he sent you to Penitentiary Post, and he didn’t play fair when he refused to send help after he heard that you were here alone.

“No, Phil, the man is a savage. He wants me and he will do anything to get me, and I’m afraid.”

Phil did not answer. Something in Joyce’s tone had caused a sense of uneasiness which her words had failed to inspire. He realized suddenly that the situation did permit Wickson to practise any deviltry he might devise. He knew the district manager had already jeopardized the Company’s interests to gain his own ends, while Joyce’s theory that Wickson would have let him go on alone after he had found her was entirely tenable in the light of other events.

“Well,” he said at length, “whether you’re right or not, the three of us have got to stick together, and the best thing we can do is to be on our guard.”

“Oh, Boynton!” came a strangely muffled voice from out in the darkness.

Phil jumped to his feet, but Joyce held him back.

“Don’t go!” she implored. “It’s a trap. Didn’t you hear how strange his voice sounded? He’s hiding and is going to kill you, Phil. Don’t go.”

“Such a thing couldn’t happen,” he replied as he tried to release himself.

“Anything can happen in such a place and with such a man,” she declared, fiercely. “Ask him what he wants.”

“What’s the matter?” Phil called.

“Come here, Boynton. Give me a hand.”

“Something is wrong,” and Phil pulled away and ran off in the darkness.

“Where are you?” he called when he reached the site of the dwelling house.

“Down here,” came a voice from his feet, and he peered into what had been the cellar beneath the kitchen.

“What’s happened?”

“I went through the floor and broke my leg or turned my ankle, or something. Give me your hand and I can get out.”

Phil reached down, braced himself, gripped the fingers that touched his, and heaved with all his strength.

“Lord, that hurts!” came from Wickson’s clenched teeth as he rolled out into the snow.

He lay still for a moment and Phil bent over him, anxiously.

“Maybe it’s only a strain,” he said, encouragingly. “You can’t have anything like that now, man!”

“I’ve got it,” was the vicious retort. “Give me a hand over to the fire.”

Phil helped him to his feet and then supported him across to the camp.

“What is it?” cried Joyce when they entered the circle of light.

“Just another little setback,” said Phil as he eased Wickson to a seat on a blanket before the fire.

He began at once to undo the moccasin lashings on the injured foot and soon had the duffles and stocking off.

“That’s it,” said Wickson as he bent forward to look, the perspiration dripping from his forehead. “I lit on that foot and turned the ankle, turned it bad. I won’t be able to put it to the ground for ten days or two weeks.”

He glanced up to see the consternation in the faces of his companions.

“Oh, don’t let it bother you,” he said, gruffly. “Go on. Get out as best you can. I’ll stay here and take my chances.”

CHAPTER XV

THE WHITE DESERT

“TAKE your chances!” Phil snorted. “What chances have you? We might as well shoot you as leave you this way.”

“But you can’t help any by staying, not if there were a dozen of you.”

“We’re not going to stay. We’ve got two dog-teams and one of them can haul you.”

“Don’t be a fool, Boynton. A dog-team is no good when you haven’t anything to feed it. I tell you, your own chances are slim enough and I won’t be a burden to any one. Besides, there is the Company to consider. Those Indians must be rounded up, supplies must be got in, and this crazy Indian put out of the way. We can’t lose a post like this.”

Phil’s face flushed with anger when Wickson mentioned the Company, and when he attempted to speak he only spluttered. Then before the words could come, he turned away and began to throw wood upon the blaze with reckless hands.

“The first thing to do is to get that ankle fixed up,” he said when the fire was roaring to suit him. “Is there anything on your toboggan we can use for a bandage?”

“There’s a spare shirt. We can’t do anything but bind it up tight.”

Phil found the shirt and cut the back into long strips. With Joyce’s help he bound the injured joint firmly and evenly and then replaced the duffles and moccasin.

“Now you must keep it quiet,” Phil said as he began to arrange Wickson’s bed beside the fire. “We won’t start to-morrow because we need a day to rest and get ready. That will give you two nights and a day when you won’t have to move, and we can keep hot cloths on it to-morrow. We’re too tired to do it to-night.”

Phil arranged Joyce's bed at Wickson's head and his own at the district manager's feet so that they flanked the fire on three sides. Each had a rabbit skin robe sewed to half of a four-point blanket, a covering that would keep them warm even without a fire, and ten minutes after Wickson's ankle had been bandaged Joyce and Phil were asleep. It wasn't long afterward before the district manager's weariness became greater than the pain and he, too, had dropped off.

It was mid-forenoon before Phil wakened and built a fire. The others did not move until tea had been boiled. The sun was shining, the entire world about them white and clean and fresh, but the camp beside the woodpile was a cheerless place and all three had wakened to a complete realization of what they faced.

"We'll see how much food there is before we cook breakfast," Phil said as he began to take things from the grub-box on Wickson's toboggan.

The others watched him expectantly, though each knew how insignificant the supplies were. When it was all spread before the fire they looked at each other questioningly.

"We're hungry enough to eat all that to-day," Phil finally said.

"Three days is as long as we can make it last. But it will take us to Solomon Moses's shore camp, and I'm banking on meat there."

"But the dogs?" asked Joyce.

"I fed them the last before we started from up the shore," answered Wickson. "Didn't you have fish stored here, Boynton?"

"Solomon wouldn't have left any of that. I'll get some breakfast and then look around. There may be something that the fire didn't touch."

After the meal Phil made a careful search of the entire place. In the cellar of the dwelling house he found a charred piece of bacon, ten pounds in all. In the ruins of the warehouse he found a pile of burned fish. He dug into it with an axe and discovered less than twenty pounds in the centre that had not been touched by the fire. Around this was enough half-baked food to last the dogs four days, while the half dozen unscorched fish would do for themselves.

When Phil had gathered in a sack all the dog food he could he turned the two teams loose and let them make a meal of the charred crumbs. The hungry animals licked up all that remained.

Little was said about the camp fire that afternoon. There was no midday meal and Phil and Joyce lay on their robes and dozed, while Wickson sat with his back against the woodpile and his injured ankle near the blaze. At sunset Phil sat up and looked at the sky.

“We’ve had enough rest,” he said, suddenly, “and night is as good as day for travelling on the shore ice. We’ll start now.”

He sliced some of the burned bacon and gave it to Joyce to fry and then began to arrange the loads on the two toboggans. By dark the teams were hitched up, Wickson was seated on the larger toboggan with his back against the robes and grub-box, and they were ready to start. Down on the shore Phil tied the leader of the second team to the tail of the first toboggan, Joyce took her seat at the rear, and they were off.

Except for brief stops every two hours to give Phil a chance to regain his breath, they travelled at a trot all night. Before the first sign of dawn they drew in close to shore, where the wind had banked up a drift against projecting pieces of shore ice, and halted.

“We’ll stay here until daylight so we can see what we’re doing,” said Phil as he sat down beside Joyce on her toboggan.

“Look here, Boynton,” suddenly exclaimed Wickson. “I’ve been thinking this thing over. Now’s the time to get this Indian. We can’t let him escape. You leave us and go ahead. Sneak up to his camp with my rifle. Make a noise and when he looks out, shoot him. We’ve got a chance to get him now and we can’t be sure of having it again.”

Phil did not answer and Wickson exclaimed, angrily:

“Why, there is no other way to look at it. This man has ruined the business of the post. You say yourself that if he continues to haunt this place not a hunter will stay with the Company. I know it looks as though I’m putting it up to you. But you’re the only one who is physically able to do it.”

“There is not a chance in the world of my being able to get him,” retorted Phil. “That Indian is only crazy on one subject. He is probably expecting just that thing, and waiting for it with his trade gun. And even if I thought that I could do it, I wouldn’t.”

Wickson, as is the case with big, active men who are unable to do what they see must be done, had grown irritable. At Phil’s refusal to consider such a plan of procedure he turned upon him savagely:

"Think, man, the chance that you have! You may hunt for days, weeks, or months before you find him again. Think what you owe the Company! God! but I wish I had two legs. Solomon Moses would never leave that camp!"

"Wickson," interrupted Phil, quietly. "You might have a dozen legs and you'd never kill that Indian while I was here to prevent it, as long as we need him for a guide to the timber country."

"Why don't you tell the truth?" taunted Wickson. "Why don't you admit that you are afraid? It's a good thing for the old H. B. C., Boynton, that it has few men like you in its service or it would be a laughing stock instead of the mighty thing it is. At least for the sake of the men who have done things in the past you might take this little chance."

At the first word Phil had jumped to his feet and run across to the injured man's toboggan.

"That's enough, Wickson," he said. "I'm running this thing and I'll run it as I see fit. I'm not afraid for myself. And I don't care particularly what happens to you. But there's a woman here. I'm responsible for her. And she's going to get out. I'm neither going to risk having that Indian get me with his trade gun nor am I going to spoil our chance of getting a guide out of this country.

"Can't you see what that would mean, Wickson? Isn't it bad enough for her to be out here now, where only men should be, without running the risk that worse things should happen? Aren't you satisfied with being responsible for the fact that she is here, without wanting to place her in greater danger?"

"Or can you see that with your single idea? I tell you that there are other things in this world besides the Hudson's Bay Company and a man's loyalty to it. Thank God, I can keep my balance."

Phil stopped speaking and stood waiting, eager for a reply, poised to deliver a fresh denunciation. But Wickson had nothing to say. From what Phil could see of him in the darkness he did not seem even to have heard. He was gazing at the black wall of night out on the ice. At last a sound came from his lips, a mocking, mirthless chuckle.

Had Phil been able to see the man's face he would have paused. He would have known that the laugh was not for him, that he even had been forgotten. But he could not see and he burst forth angrily:

"I don't want to hear talk of loyalty from you, Wickson. I'll never learn it from a man who has put himself ahead of the Company as you have done.

You are responsible for the loss of Fort Dease, for everything that has happened here. You did it all because— —”

“That’s enough,” snapped Wickson. “You’ve said all that. Go ahead and run this thing as you want to.”

Phil, more angry than ever, was about to speak again when he heard Joyce call his name softly and he turned and went back to her.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “It doesn’t do any good, and it only takes your strength to become so angry. He’s not worth it, Phil.”

“But— —”

“Yes, I heard all he said, and if it is the thing to do, the thing to do for the Company, I wish you would.”

“You’re a better man than he is,” he whispered as he drew her to him.

“But,” she protested, “I wish you wouldn’t stay back on my account.”

“It isn’t on your account. Now that John Wickson sees what his treachery has cost the Company he can think only of saving it. But we are going to get out and we are going to save Fort Dease. I can think of both. And I am not going to let the work of one spoil the chance of doing the other. I didn’t tell him so. I couldn’t, I was so mad. I don’t want to capture Solomon Moses now. I want him to see us in plenty of time so that he can start off for the timber. It’s our only chance to get out. Everything depends on it. After that we can save Fort Dease and put Solomon out of the way.”

“But Phil! You’re not going to kill him on sight?”

“I don’t see what else there is to do.”

“But that’s a monstrous thing. You haven’t the right to take a human life that way, even if the man is insane.”

Phil shrugged his shoulders.

“There are some things you have to do in this country.”

“But you can’t! It’s a terrible thing! It’s not right! It’s not just! You must promise that you’ll try first to capture him, to take him prisoner and turn him over to the proper authorities. If he’s insane he is not at fault.”

“What would I do with him if I did capture him alive? He would be a constant source of danger to you and a burden that might prevent our getting out.”

“No, you must promise you won’t.”

It was the first time Phil had ever been asked for a promise and it was the first thing Joyce had ever asked of him.

“All right,” he said after a moment. “I’ll try.”

Dawn came a half-hour later and they started along the shore. Phil had no way of knowing how close he might be to the island of spruce in which the Indian had his camp but he had not gone more than a mile before it appeared ahead of him. He hurried on until he struck a fresh snowshoe trail leading away from the shore.

“It’s just a mile from here,” he said when he stopped the dogs and went back to the first toboggan for his snowshoes. “Joyce, you go ahead of this team. Here are Wickson’s snowshoes. Don’t keep too close when we are near the camp. I’ll go ahead.”

He called loudly to the dogs to follow him and plunged up the bank, Wickson’s rifle in his hands. Half way to the island of spruce he called sharply to his dogs and a little later turned and struck at one with his fist. The poor brute, which had been toiling patiently, yelped in fright and astonishment as it sprang to one side while the wheel dog, which protested whenever any member of the team was punished, sat back on his haunches and howled.

“That will give him a start, unless he’s on one of his meat drunks,” Phil thought as he went on again.

Two hundred yards from the edge of the timber he halted again.

“I’m not going to take the chance that he is lying in the brush with a gun,” he called back to Joyce. “I’m going to make a circle and see if he has gone.”

He swung out to the left until he was able to see the bare, white waste on the other side of the spruce. Then, when he stopped to watch, he caught a black dot on the drifts far ahead of him and speeding in the opposite direction.

“He’s gone!” he called to the others. “He’s started back for the timber country. Now we’ve got a trail that will take us out.”

Eagerly they pushed ahead and in five minutes the teams were halted beside the wigwam in which Phil had been held prisoner. Phil dived inside at once and began to paw over the pile of furs in the rear. Wickson sitting on his toboggan, Joyce watching the dogs, they heard him call. The next moment he came out dragging a hind quarter of caribou.

“We won’t starve yet!” he exclaimed. “And we’ll have some right now. There’s a fire still going inside and it won’t take long to fry a few steaks.”

“You’re going right on, aren’t you?” asked Wickson.

“Of course. We’ve got to let him know we’re after him. Otherwise he might double back.”

All morning the fleeing black dot on the great snow plain was in sight. The crust was hard and firm, having been packed by the wind and stiffened by the intense cold, and with his long, narrow, turned-up snowshoes Phil was able to maintain a good pace, while the dogs, with their comparatively light loads, followed easily.

Contrary to Phil’s expectation, Solomon’s snowshoes did not leave a well-marked trail. The crust was too hard, and it was only in little patches of snow that had lodged in the depressions that the path of the fleeing Indian could be seen.

When the sun was up the wind began to blow and soon even the few snowshoe impressions began to fade. Phil looked ahead anxiously. Solomon had reached the black line which marked the beginning of the stunted spruce, the tops of which barely showed above the surface of the snow. Against such a background, and at that distance, he could no longer be seen.

Phil glanced back and saw that the spruce island near the bay was still visible. It was his last landmark. If he went on, if the sky became clouded, he would be completely lost before night. If the wind continued to wipe out the faint imprints of Solomon’s snowshoes there would be nothing to guide him.

He stopped the dogs as if for one of his usual breathing spells but he did not go back to sit down on Joyce’s toboggan. Instead, he kept looking ahead, weighing the chances, trying to reach a decision. If he pressed on and lost the trail it would be certain death for all three. He could never hope to cross the barren waste unguided. Even if he did cross it, he would be little better off.

To turn back offered no better alternative. He could only return to Solomon’s camp, or the site of Fort Dease, and start out anew but with no better chance of reaching any place and with less food. As Phil realized this he looked across the desolate waste before him and shivered. To go back meant to delay the end. To go on brought it nearer. He could picture them wandering out there on the white plain until starved and frozen. He didn’t

care for himself, and he did not think of Wickson, but the thought of the torture in store for Joyce was more than he could bear.

He hesitated; turned back. As he was about to swing out and wheel the team he glanced again toward the place where he had last seen the Indian. Beyond the black line of the first stunted bushes, in a clear space no larger than his hand, it seemed, there appeared for an instant a crawling speck against the white snow.

“I’m a fool,” he muttered as he started forward again. “It’s the only chance. Come on, puppies.”

CHAPTER XVI

SOLOMON'S TRAIL

A LITTLE after noon Phil reached the first of the dwarfed growth that showed above the surface of the snow. For more than an hour there had not been a trace of Solomon Moses and he had been guided entirely by the little patch of white he had seen beyond the black line.

Once in the brush, however, Phil struck something that was both a difficulty and an incalculable benefit. Sheltered by the spruce, the snow had not been packed so firmly by the wind. The surface became softer and soon Phil was walking in six inches of it. Sometimes drifts two feet deep were piled up. Since the last storm there had been no severe winds accompanied by low temperatures to pack and stiffen the snow, and the last fall still lay loosely on top.

Eagerly Phil pressed on toward the opening which he had seen the Indian cross. There he would find the trail if he was ever to find it, and from there he must continue with as few rests as possible until he reached the permanent camp of Solomon Moses in his old hunting-ground.

The Indian's trail was there and Phil swung into it with a fresh burst of speed. Though he had travelled all night and all day, he kept on with only short rests until darkness finally compelled a halt.

Joyce, who had been riding almost continuously, did most of the work of making camp. Phil did not realize his great weariness until he stopped and begun to chill. He unharnessed the dogs while Joyce dug a great hole in the snow and gathered brush for a fire. When everything was done except the cooking she insisted on Phil sitting down while she attended to that, and the next morning she was up and had breakfast ready before he wakened.

As she worked there beside the fire in the darkness she was conscious of being watched and glanced up to see Wickson looking at her.

"Good morning," she whispered. "Your ankle better?"

"Yes, thanks, but still useless."

Joyce touched her lips with a finger and motioned toward Phil.

"I know," Wickson whispered. "He needs the sleep. It was a great day's work he did yesterday. I didn't think he could last it through."

Joyce turned to her boiling tea and simmering meat with a sudden, inexplicable feeling of friendliness toward the injured man. At first she believed it was because they were equal partners in the face of a great danger. But they had been before. As she puzzled over the situation, pretending to be busy with the kettle of meat, she realized that it was a change in Wickson himself. For the first time he had looked at her without that disturbing light in his eyes. For the first time since that dinner in Savant House she did not feel uncomfortable in his presence.

Wondering, she glanced at him again, but this time he was not watching her.

"Tell me, honestly," she said, "what our chances are. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Our chances are good, if Boynton can stand the pace," Wickson replied at once. "He did the only thing we could do, and you can help by going ahead once in a while and giving him a ride. That's the only thing I'm afraid of, his playing out. He didn't start in good shape, but he's young and a man can stand a lot of punishment when he has to."

Phil did ride for an hour altogether that day, while Joyce, with Wickson's snowshoes, went ahead of the dogs. Solomon Moses' trail was unmistakable but it had one disconcerting feature. When they camped that second night they had not found a place where the Indian had stopped to sleep. He had gone on without a rest for a day and a night, and as he travelled quite as fast as they he must be a day ahead of them, perhaps thirty or more miles.

Wickson, who had watched every foot of the trail from his seat on the toboggan, commented on this fact that night, and Phil looked anxiously at the sky, as he had done often in the afternoon.

"I know it," he said, "and the only thing we can hope for is that it doesn't snow until we reach the spruce. Once in the timber we can find his trail, even if there is a foot of snow on it."

"And out here?" asked Joyce.

"It would be hopeless in an hour or two, less if there should be a wind with the snow."

It did not snow that night nor the next day, though the clouds still hung low. In the middle of the forenoon Joyce was leading while Phil took a breathing spell on the toboggan. For a mile the trail led through thick brush, much of which was taller and more sturdy than that through which they had been travelling.

“Boynton! Your rifle! Quick!” cried Wickson.

“What is it?” asked Phil as he floundered ahead through the drifts without his snowshoes.

Joyce, at Wickson’s call, had drawn back in sudden fear and was looking uncertainly about her.

“There’s a camp ahead,” whispered Wickson as Phil passed him. “Be careful. He may be there.”

“Come back, Joyce,” commanded Phil as he started ahead. “Get behind Wickson and keep low.”

He slipped into the brush at one side of the trail and began to work forward. At last, by bending down, he could see a skin tent just ahead.

His rifle ready, he moved nearer, stopping every few feet to look around and to listen. But there was no sound and no movement and he reached the camp without seeing any indication of the Indian’s presence.

He was at the rear, but from his final position he could see the snowshoe trail leading up from the direction in which he had come, while on the other side the webbed impressions went on toward the west. Solomon had come and gone.

Still moving cautiously and ready with his rifle, Phil went around to the front of the wigwam and looked in. It was empty.

“Bring up the dogs,” he called. “He has gone.”

He threw back the flap over the door and entered. The ashes in the centre were still warm and one coal showed when he blew upon them.

“What is it?” called Joyce from outside.

“Wait a minute,” Phil answered as he began a search.

The wigwam was much smaller than that in which he had been held prisoner. Placed near the door where they could be seen at once were two bones freshly stripped. But nowhere was there any caribou. He picked up the bones, crawled out through the low door and stood up.

“Any meat?” asked Wickson.

“Only these,” Phil answered holding up the bones. “Left to remind us that he has meat and we haven’t much. But they may be welcome in soup later. Solomon stopped long enough to have a good meal.”

“Then we have lost him!” cried Joyce. “If this is his camp we’ll never find him.”

“This is only a relay camp,” Phil exclaimed. “I might have known he would have something like this between the timber and his shore camp. This is where he came for meat when he had me tied in the other wigwam.”

“Let’s get along, then,” interrupted Wickson. “It hasn’t helped any to find it.”

“It did help,” Phil replied. “It delayed Solomon and he is no more than six hours ahead of us now. There was a coal or two still left in the ashes, and the coals from this small spruce don’t last long. He probably started from here at daylight this morning.”

Wickson looked at the low clouds and noted the direction of the wind.

“That gain may help, but I doubt it,” he said. “We’re not more than half way, if his hunting district is somewhere near Berens River, and if it snows and blows before we get into the thick spruce we’ll never track him.”

Phil knew as well as the district manager what a snow-storm would do to them. With the first flake the gain of a day and a half over the Indian would be valueless. Without his track to guide them there was no possibility of their ever reaching a place where they could obtain food. It meant the end.

They started at once, Phil in the lead and shoving his snowshoes ahead savagely. Tired as he was, already beginning to feel the results of half rations, the dread of the coming snow aroused anger rather than fear. He glared at the clouds and dared them to open their heavy bins, and all the time he kept increasing his pace, scorning the usual stops for rests, driving himself on through the remainder of the day. At last darkness and weariness combined to send him stumbling along the sides of the trail and he called a halt.

Phil went to sleep while Joyce cooked supper. She gathered the wood, dug out a hole for the beds, assisted Wickson to a place beside the fire, melted snow for the tea and set meat to simmering in a kettle. The brush

burned quickly and she spent much time gathering enough to do what little cooking there was to be done.

All the time Wickson watched her closely and Joyce knew that he did. But as in the morning she felt something different in his scrutiny. Once she stole a glance at him when her face was in the shadow and saw that, while his eyes were upon her, his thoughts were not. He seemed to be planning, scheming, turning something over and over in his mind, and the tense stare and furrowed brow, the forceful attitude and the lack of uncertainty in his expression, dismayed Joyce more than anything she had ever known about him before.

Her old fears and disquietude returned. As she had always believed, the man was ruthless. He sat there planning to resume the battle the minute the three were safe again. While others toiled and fought for him he devised fresh means of ruining the happiness which she and Phil deserved.

Joyce was not the sort of woman who would have feared Wickson or any other man under normal circumstances. She was intelligent enough to know that any one would be powerless to accomplish such a thing. But up there in the North country everything was different. This man was like the land in which he lived. He was as cruel as the cold, as ruthless as a blizzard, as unswerving and as insatiable as the snarling water of the great rivers. Mercy was absent in him as in the land itself.

And it was toward this that they were struggling. She and Phil together were taking this man to a place of safety that again he might attempt to wreck their happiness. Angrily she poked at the meat in the kettle with a stick. Was it worth it? Would it not be better to die out there on the great white desert where they could be together, where they could be sure of each other, than to struggle on that this man might win in the end?

She did not know what he might do. Her reason told her that in reality he could accomplish nothing against her love for Phil. And yet all she had seen of the man, all she had heard of him, all the things she had felt of him served to oppress with a certainty that his will would prevail. There was no law, no convention, no power of any sort, to which he need give heed. Like the North itself, he would conquer in the end.

And then, swinging down slowly, lazily, turning to dart upward and melt in the warm air above the fire, came the first flakes of the storm. Joyce, her former fears instantly forgotten in the face of this immediate terror, turned pleadingly to the man she had just declared to be without mercy.

“Is it the end?” her eyes asked plainly.

Wickson nodded but did not speak. His eyes shone with fury. Silently he shook his fist at the sky. Crippled, helpless, he sat there defying the North to do its worst. There was no fear, no supplication, in his attitude, and as she looked Joyce found herself admiring the courage of the man while she dreaded his power.

The snowflakes, falling thickly now, struck Phil's face and wakened him. He sat up slowly, still dazed, and then the significance of the storm reached him. He glanced quickly at the others and then spread his hand before the little blaze.

No one spoke. Joyce forgot the meat simmering in the kettle. Phil continued to stare into the fire and Wickson at the snow as it dropped into the zone of firelight. There was no bluster, no noise, no furore about the storm. A summer evening could not have been more peaceful, and yet each softly fluttering flake spelled the end for those three out there in the middle of that trackless, treeless waste.

At last Joyce lifted the kettle from the fire and they began to eat supper. It was the first meal since morning and they were very hungry. But even the food, welcome as it was, failed to rouse them from their despondency, and as soon as the last shred of meat was gone and the last drop of broth was drained, each turned to his robes and spread them beside the dying fire.

But, tired as they were, none of them slept for a time. The fire quickly died down and left the camp in darkness. At first there were spots where each lay, where the fire had been built, where the toboggans had been turned on edge beside them. But gradually the black shapes became dim and in half an hour everything lay white except a small place where a few lingering coals still spluttered as the snow struck them.

The dogs, tied to the dwarfed growth about the camp, had been restless at the beginning of the storm but gradually they dug nests in the drifts and went to sleep. The spot was as quiet as any other on that vast, lifeless plain.

Out of that tomb-like silence there burst upon the three people in the camp the first notes of a demoniacal shriek that rose and fell with a mocking cadence. It ended in a wild burst of laughter and a gleeful chuckle that brought a chill even to Wickson's heart as he threw back his robe and sat up.

CHAPTER XVII

WICKSON TELLS OF HIS LOVE

“‘T^{HAT}’s not a wolf,” whispered Wickson. “What is it? Even the dogs are scared. They never answered.”

“It’s the weeteego,” answered Joyce, her voice trembling and hoarse.

“Take the rifle and get after him, Boynton,” commanded the district manager. “He isn’t far.”

“I will not!” retorted Phil, exultantly. “That yelling nearly drove me crazy last month, but I never heard a sweeter sound than it was just now.”

“Sweeter!” exclaimed Wickson, angrily. “He’ll come in here and murder us before we can make a move.”

Phil’s elation vanished, but not because of what Wickson had said.

“I’m afraid it won’t help,” he said, “though there is no danger. You don’t understand Solomon Moses. I told you his life-work is to starve a Hudson’s Bay Company man. He is going to stick around here and chuckle because he thinks we’re finished now for good. You should have seen the joy in his face when he told me how he would watch me die. He can’t resist coming to mock us.”

“But if he stays until the storm is over we can track him!” cried Joyce.

“That’s what I first thought of but he’s too clever for that. He’s banking on a long storm, two days probably, with a wind at the end of it. He’ll stay out there and laugh at us until midnight. Then he’ll slip off and by daylight there won’t be a sign of his tracks.”

Again the howl burst upon them, ending as before in a wild chuckle of delight.

“The thing to do is to keep watch and start as soon as he does,” declared Wickson. “It’s our only chance.”

“And Solomon will see that we don’t get it,” retorted Phil. “You know there is no chance whatever of finding him out in that,” and he swung his arm at the brush and the darkness and the thickly falling snow.

Tired as they were, there was no sleep for any of them so long as Solomon Moses howled. Sometimes he came so close to camp that all three started as if he were upon them. Sometimes he sounded as if he were far away. He howled to the right and the left, to the front and the rear. He retreated and advanced, and once after he had been barely heard there was a long silence.

“He’s gone!” exclaimed Phil. “That ends us.”

He turned to his robe, shook off the snow, and prepared to go to sleep. Joyce followed but Wickson, under the spell of the demoniacal shrieks for the first time, remained sitting on his robe.

At last, just as Phil had dropped off to sleep, the howl came from close by. Phil and Joyce sat up again, expectant, encouraged.

For a long time they sat there. Every few minutes Solomon shrieked his joy at them until to Wickson, at least, it became maddening. Phil only laughed.

“I hope he forgets himself,” he said, “and waits until daylight. If he only would, we’d have a chance.”

Joyce arranged her robe about her shoulders and shivered.

“It’s getting cold,” she said, and her teeth chattered. “It was warm when the storm began.”

Phil glanced up at the sky, saw that the flakes of snow were smaller and less in number. Suddenly he sprang to his feet. As he did so Solomon howled again, close by this time. But the startling thing was the new note, a note of terror, that dominated the shriek. It was terror and dismay and defeat, all told in a wild, wailing cry. The noise of crashing brush came to those in the camp and then all was still.

“What is it?” whispered Joyce.

“See!” cried Phil, pointing toward the north. “That’s what got him.”

The others looked up to see a bright star shining through a rift in the clouds. As they stared another appeared.

“The wind changed!” Phil continued, excitedly. “It’s clearing off. We’ll get out yet. We’ll be on his track at daylight.”

When the dawn came they had started, pushing on toward the west, again only six hours behind. The day was bright and cold, Solomon's trail plain and fresh, and they made good time until dark. The next day it was the same, and when they camped that night they knew that they would be within the shelter of the timber the next forenoon.

This knowledge was accepted differently by each of the three. To Wickson, brooding all day over thoughts he shared with no one, it seemed almost a matter of indifference. Joyce, watching him anxiously, trying vainly to read his intentions, felt that it mattered little that they had covered the most hazardous part of their journey if their happiness was still to be ruined by this man of implacable purpose.

To Phil alone the nearness of the timber was an unmixed relief. He alone seemed to realize what it meant to them in the way of shelter from storms, possibilities of meat, and, best of all, a clear trail to the camp of Solomon Moses. After supper he did not go to sleep at once, as had been his custom. Tired as he was, he could not refrain from sitting by the fire and planning on the next day.

"None of us knows how near his camp is," he began. "We're liable to strike it 'most any time after noon. I'm not looking for an ambush, but I am afraid he may destroy what meat he had there, or make off with it."

"But he won't have time to get far," Joyce offered.

"Yes, because he is a day and a half ahead. He didn't stop after he left us that night in the storm. And he must know that we're on his trail. The thing for us is to figure out what he will do."

"If his plan is to starve us, as he has been trying to do, he'll destroy any food there is in his camp," said Wickson.

"That's reasonable," said Phil. "Then what are we to do?"

"We're in a territory where there are other Indian hunters, and there is a chance that we'll run across a hunting trail."

"We've got to do that anyway, to win through, but the first question is to deal with Solomon himself. Then, when that's done, we've got to get on the trail of some hunter at once. We haven't much meat left, and there is only one more meal for the dogs, half a meal at that. When we find a hunter we've got to send him for another. We've got to get messengers to all the Fort Dease Indians and tell them that the weeteego is dead and won't bother them again. We've got to get a messenger to Fort Berens and have a

boatload of supplies start up the bay as soon as the ice goes out, and I've got to get back to Dease and be ready for the hunters when they do come."

"You! Back to Fort Dease!"

Joyce looked at him in consternation.

"Of course," said Phil. "I'm the one who gave out the debt and as the books are burned, I'm the only one who can collect the fur."

"Then I'm going with you."

It was the first time Phil had even considered where Joyce should go, once they were in a place of safety, and he did not answer.

"There is no other place for me to go," she protested.

"Perhaps you're right," said Phil. "You can get back to Savant House in the summer. But we've got to handle Solomon Moses first. I'm going to keep ahead to-morrow so that if he has any trap you won't get caught. I don't think there will be, but we want to play as safe as possible. After we get hold of him, we can plan the next move."

Phil had ignored the fact that Wickson was his superior officer, that he should look to him for orders and suggestions. Now that they were nearing possible safety, too, his thoughts turned at once to what must be done for the Company. His own future, and that of Joyce, must depend on his work, and, while he felt that he was just in his charge that Wickson was responsible for all the trouble, the fact remained that ruin had come to Fort Dease while it was in his custody and that he must regain as much as possible of what had been lost.

Now that he was about to act, now that he was the aggressor, he forgot his weariness and the dangers that still lay ahead. He became more than ever the leader, the confident director of their activities, and he was eager for morning to come.

Joyce saw this, felt proud because of it, and in her exultation she glanced involuntarily at Wickson. The district manager read her thoughts instantly and, to her surprise, he grinned good-humouredly.

"You're right, Boynton," he agreed. "And I guess I'll be on my feet in time to help. If you can carry things through as you have planned, nothing more can be expected. The only weak point is my own suggestion. Everything depends upon our getting food in Solomon's camp, if we find it,

and then in running across the trail of a hunter. That last is not so easy as it sounds. There are not many Indians ahead of us and it's going to be luck if we find one before we starve."

"We've run greater risks than that so far, and there's Solomon to deal with first," said Phil as he prepared his robe for the night.

He tucked himself in beside the fire and was asleep at once. Joyce and Wickson still sat facing the blaze, for they had not driven themselves to exhaustion as had Phil.

In the presence of only the district manager the girl's exultation soon vanished. Despite the man's friendly smile, despite his submission to all that Phil had planned, her fear of him only increased. He was letting Phil do the work, letting him get them out to a place of safety and save Fort Dease. But what after that? He had sent Phil to Penitentiary Post to get him out of the way, had given him an inconsequential station when his abilities deserved the best opportunity. Why would he not do something worse once he had returned to Savant House. It would be easily possible for him to ruin Phil's future with a report of the winter that was properly coloured, or uncoloured. He need not lie. He need only omit part of the truth to damn Phil forever.

Wickson moved carefully to one side and began to spread out his robe. He had not been looking at Joyce, did not seem to know that she was there. His face was hard and resolute, had that expression she feared more than any other. As he lay down he saw Joyce staring at him.

"Wait until I'm on my feet!" he exclaimed as he pulled the robe over his face.

As usual, they were under way at daybreak the next morning. Phil was ahead with Wickson's rifle, the only weapon they had. The district manager and Joyce rode on the toboggans. Two hours took them well into the spruce forest.

"I'll go on ahead now," said Phil as he stopped for his first breathing spell. "Keep about half an hour behind me. We may not reach his camp to-day, and it may be only a few miles from here. If I see any signs of him I'll lay something across the trail. You stop there until I call or come for you."

Joyce and Wickson waited the half-hour and then spoke to the dogs. There was a fair trail and the teams needed only an occasional urging. Joyce was in the lead and as she sat on the toboggan she looked ahead constantly, while always her ears were ready for the sound of a rifle shot or Phil's voice.

But nothing happened. Nothing lay across their path. Hour after hour passed. And then at noon Joyce suddenly stopped her dogs at a bend in the trail. Lying across it just ahead was a dead branch of a spruce.

“Better go ahead and tie the leader,” said Wickson when he saw what had happened. “We don’t want these dogs to get a smell of the camp and stampede us into it until Boynton is ready.”

Joyce took a chain from the toboggan, waded through the snow to the head dog and fastened him to a tree. As she was about to turn back she saw something on the smooth surface beside the trail and went forward. Traced in the snow with a stick was a message from Phil:

Smelled smoke. Close.

“What is it?” called Wickson.

Joyce motioned silence and waded back to his toboggan.

“We mustn’t make any noise,” she said. “Phil wrote in the snow that he had smelled smoke just ahead.”

“The wind is this way, but it means he is close. We ought to get action soon.”

Joyce brushed the snow from a windfall a few feet away and sat down facing the place where Phil had gone. For a time she waited quietly but as the minutes slipped by and there was no sound, nothing to tell what was happening in the forest ahead, she became restless. Once she glanced at Wickson and saw him watching her with a queer smile about his mouth.

“Hard on the nerves, eh?” he asked.

Joyce sprang from her seat and started toward her own toboggan. He was mocking her, taunting her with the possibilities of what might be happening ahead of them, and a wave of anger and hatred swept over her.

“I didn’t mean anything like that,” he said. “Sit down again. I’ve been wanting to speak to you.”

“I don’t know of anything you can say that will interest me!” replied Joyce, fiercely, though she was conscious of a softened note in his voice she had never heard before.

“I think it will,” he retorted, harshly now. “I imagine, woman-like, you have come to the conclusion that because you and Boynton didn’t desert me

back there at Fort Dease, because you have gone to a lot of trouble in an effort to save my life, I'll be good in the future?"

Joyce, startled by the brutal frankness of the question, only stared at him.

"What I wanted to say," Wickson continued, "is that you are mistaken if you do think so. Ever since we left Fort Dease I've been afraid that you would—afraid that you would expect something of me.

"But," and he hitched himself upright and struck his knee with a mittened fist, "I'm not that sort. I wouldn't stoop to such a thing. It's not a man's way. It's not my way. If I have ever wanted anything I have gone after it. I have won it. I never let any consideration except my own ideas of what is right stand in my path. And I've always got what I went after. You've probably heard that since you've been in the North country. I always win."

The last had not been said boastingly. The man had spoken merely as if he were stating a well-known fact, but the significance of his words served only to bring fresh terror to Joyce, to leave her standing there in the snow staring at him, hating him, fearing him, and wholly unprepared for his next statement.

"But I don't want you. I thought I did. I thought I wanted you more than anything I had ever wanted. That's why I made that trip from Savant House to Fort Dease. That's why I started down the shore looking for you the minute I read the last word of your note. And if I still wanted you I wouldn't let Boynton or anything Boynton has done for me, or could do against me, stand in the way of my having you. But I don't want you.

"That's why I'm telling you this. I don't want you or him to think I quit a fight because you happened to do me a good turn. I'm not that sort, and if I wanted you now I wouldn't give you up."

He spoke harshly, vehemently, with a depth of passion that seemed altogether out of proportion with his words. He was so volcanic in his delivery that, despite the thought he had conveyed, Joyce still looked at him in speechless apprehension.

"I just wanted to make myself clear on that point," he continued, more mildly. "I wanted you to know that you have nothing more to fear from me, if it's fear you have of me, and I wanted you to understand that it wasn't any softening on my part, any feeling of gratitude."

For a moment Joyce continued to stare. Her apprehension vanished as she finally grasped what he had said. A smile spread over her face, cracked the frosted skin of her cheeks and chin. And then she burst into uncontrolled laughter.

“What is it?” demanded Wickson, angrily. “What’s so funny?”

“I can’t help it,” she managed to say between choking fits of mirth. “It’s all so—so—I— —”

“Don’t get hysterical,” he advised.

“I’m not. I— —you don’t know much about women, do you?”

“I guess I know all that any one does. It isn’t much.”

“That proves it,” she replied, quickly. “A man who knows the first thing about women would never think of saying what you said to me. It’s insulting, it’s aggravating, it’s maddeningly challenging.”

She stopped suddenly and bit her lip.

“Don’t make that mistake in my case,” he growled. “I merely told you how I felt.”

She looked at him skeptically for a moment but she could not but believe that the man was sincere in all the strange things he had said. She remembered, too, that unaccountable change she had felt in his attitude toward her and the friendly smile he had given her while Phil was asleep, and instantly curiosity possessed her.

“Would you mind,” she asked, hesitatingly, “mind explaining this sudden—this sudden change?”

For the first time she saw embarrassment in Wickson’s face. His eyes fell before hers and he did not look up again when he spoke.

“There are some things a man doesn’t like to talk about,” he answered, gruffly.

But Joyce, or any other woman, would not be rebuffed on such a quest.

“I ought to know wherein I failed,” she protested. “It’s only fair to me, since you have been so frank.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I would try to understand.”

He looked at her appraisingly for a moment.

“Boynton was the cause of it all.”

“Phil! How?”

“Oh, nothing he did. He couldn’t have done anything to change me. It was something he said. It opened my eyes, gave me a new view of myself, and you weren’t in that view, that’s all.”

It seemed final, and Joyce, despite the challenge of his attitude and words, despite her insistent desire to get at the bottom of this sudden change toward her, refrained from pressing the point. She resumed her seat on the windfall, and when she looked at Wickson again he began to speak.

“I may as well tell you,” he announced. “You’ll not believe it all, but it’s the truth, every word of it, and I’d rather have you know than to think I have a soft streak.

“They say I am a savage,” he continued. “They say I was born in the North and that I’m as hard as the North. Oh, they don’t say it to me, but I know they say it. They think I’m all body, that I get ahead by the bulk of me. But they’re fools. I’ve got a mind, I can use it, and I can out-think any of them. They say I bull into things regardless, but I don’t. I reason everything out. Or I always did until you came. Now I’ve reasoned you out.

“Not until you came to Savant House did I ever go off my head. I did completely then. And when I did, I lost the two things which have meant most in my life. You did that to me.”

He stopped speaking and Joyce was unaccountably affected. She forgot that it was her power that had done this, overlooked entirely that he had paid an unconscious tribute to her beauty and desirability, forgot even that John Wickson was suffering as she had hoped he would suffer. She remembered only that she was listening to the most appealing thing in the world, a confession of weakness by a strong man. She felt that she must say something but she did not know what it could be. Then Wickson looked up quickly.

“But you never can do it again,” he resumed, fiercely. “Now I know how little you really count in my life. I see how unimportant you are to me compared to what I owe to the Company.”

“To the Company!” exclaimed Joyce, involuntarily.

“Yes, to the Company. All my life I have known that I was serving it faithfully, giving it all my strength, all my energy, all my ability to win. Then you came. For the first time I forgot it. I sent Boynton off to Dease

when he should have had a post where he would be given a chance to do the work he can do best. When I knew he was in trouble I let him get out the best he could. I wanted him out of the way. I wanted you.

“Then when I learned you had gone to Dease I started after you at once. I went down the shore after you, and I was going to take you back. And then you did the second thing to me. You took away all my pride in my ability to win through myself, made me a coward, a weakling, ready to win by letting Boynton go away and die in the storm while he was looking for you. That brought me to. I saw what I had become, how I had failed myself, and, worst of all, had failed the Company. I resolved to win back everything I had lost.

“That morning when we stopped to wait for daylight and Boynton wouldn’t go on and kill Solomon Moses, I was beside myself. Your life, my life, Boynton’s life, nothing counted in my desire to undo the wrong I had done the Company. And then Boynton said that which explained me to myself. He said I thought only of the Company, but that he could keep his balance. And I knew at once that he was right. He was balanced. He was balanced with you in his life. I wasn’t and I never could be. I live for only one thing, the Hudson’s Bay Company, and there isn’t room for anything else in my life. I thought you meant everything to me, but when he said that, I saw that you never could mean anything worth while. No woman can. I wasn’t made to be influenced by a woman. I wasn’t made to share anything with one. I saw that as soon as I got you I would forget you. I’d go back to my first sweetheart, the only one I ever had or ever will have.”

Wickson had raised himself up so that he sat on the top of the load. His face was more gentle than Joyce had ever believed it could be. His eyes were lighted as are only those of a man who tells of the biggest thing in his life. He seemed transformed by the passion of an ideal.

“You don’t know what it means,” he continued. “You can’t ever know. But my father and his father were brought up in the service and died in it. I have never known anything else. It has been responsible for every act of my life. It means everything to me. I’d die to-morrow for it. I’d do anything to serve it. I slipped once, when you came, but I’ll make up for that. I’ll give everything I’ve got, everything I can get, to the once big ideal of my life. It’s the Company, the men in the Company, and the memory of the men who have made it what it is, the memory of the countless ones who have lived and died for it, that I love. You! I only thought I loved you. There’s no room for you in my life. I’m not built that way. Boynton is. He can love you and be loyal to the Company. He’s balanced when he has you both. I lost my balance. I couldn’t have two things in my life. Thank God I saw it in time.”

CHAPTER XVIII

SOLOMON GETS HIS MEAT

AFTER PHIL had left Joyce and Wickson to follow more slowly and had gone on alone through the spruce forest he began to realize the difficulties before him. As hour after hour went by and there was no sign of the Indian having stopped, or of his camp, misgivings and anxiety added to his nervousness. So much depended upon his success, so many things might bring failure.

Phil knew that Solomon expected pursuit. The Indian could tell even the approximate time when the dog-teams would reach his camp. He had gained a big lead by travelling night and day, and there would be plenty of time for him to destroy whatever meat he had or to double back beside his trail and lie in ambush. He might do neither of these things but lead his pursuers in a circle, crossing and recrossing his trail, until they perished from exhaustion and starvation.

But as Phil hurried on, driven to greater speed by the necessity of quick action, fearful of every thicket because it might shelter Solomon and his trade gun, an encouraging thought came to him. The Indian would reach his camp tired and hungry. He would have meat there, and in the presence of meat he could not maintain his caution or his sanity. If Phil could strike his camp just after one of these debauches his work would be easy.

The idea brought confidence and a new burst of speed, and he pressed on with less fear of an ambush. He became more and more certain that he would find Solomon in a stupor and consequently was wholly unprepared for the smell of smoke that suddenly came to his nostrils.

Instantly he stopped, found a dead branch to lay across the trail, traced his message in the snow, and then squirmed into the brush on one side and began to work his way forward. But as he slipped the mitten from his right hand and let it dangle by a string that his trigger finger might be ready he remembered his promise to Joyce. As he considered it he found that, even without the pledge, he would hesitate to shoot the Indian in cold blood. Just

what chance for his life he would give Solomon he had not decided when he saw the wigwam in an open spot just ahead of him.

The flap over the door was down and smoke was coming from the hole at the peak, a light, hazy smoke that rose swiftly, evidence of a bright fire inside. And a bright fire meant that Solomon was awake, alert.

As Phil stood there in the brush debating his next move the Indian decided it for him. The flap was pushed back and Solomon crawled out. As he rose to his feet he listened, looking down the trail by which he had come. Then his eyes quickly swept the edge of the opening until they found Phil.

But even as Phil knew that he was discovered, even as his lips framed the words in Cree, "stand still," Solomon had leaped backward and disappeared behind the wigwam. Phil sprang forward at once, running out to one side to catch a glimpse of the Indian if possible. But he had already reached a dense thicket a few yards behind his camp and had disappeared.

Phil started after him without hesitation. Solomon was without snowshoes and could not go far before he was overtaken. But the man had gone through the middle of a clump of tangled spruce saplings and Phil stumbled and tripped and forced his way with difficulty.

When he emerged in larger, more open timber the Indian was not in sight. His trail was plain, however, and Phil started after him confident that he could soon overtake him. The spruce became thinner and the ground began to rise gradually until he burst through a fringe of brush and came out on the crest of a low ridge.

Before him was spread out a great, shallow bowl, perhaps two hundred yards in width and bare of trees. Here and there were small clumps of brush, while in the centre the ground rose gently to a little knoll that was cut off squarely on the right.

Running straight toward this knoll, and less than one hundred yards from him, was Solomon. Phil raised his rifle, intending to shoot over the man's head, but even as his eyes lined up with the sights he became conscious of a movement on the edge of the bowl at his right. The next instant there flowed over the rim and down toward the centre of the depression a herd of at least twenty caribou. They appeared singly and in pairs, bounding through the snow, stringing down the slope.

As Phil watched, too startled by their sudden appearance to act, a halt in Solomon's flight turned his attention again to the Indian. He, too, had seen the caribou, and instantly he ceased to be the fugitive. He dropped into the

snow and crawled forward swiftly. His shaggy back was not unlike that of a great bear as he wallowed along in the deep drift, while the stealth of his actions and the quick, alert movements of his head gave the impression of some huge beast of prey.

Despite the deep snow and the steep ascent, Solomon reached the top of the knoll in an incredibly short time. Not once had he turned to see if he were pursued. Not once had his attention been on anything except the approaching caribou. At the edge he crouched, tense, expectant. And then as the first of the herd passed beneath him he sprang out and down upon the back of the leader, a big, galloping bull.

If Solomon had stalked like a wolf and leaped like a bear, he assailed his prey as does a lynx or mountain lion. Far away as he stood, Phil could hear a snarl and a shriek as the caribou went down to its knees and the two rolled over and over.

For a moment they were hidden by the flying snow, and then the bull emerged from the smother, rearing and striking and trying to run, snorting, wild eyed, driven to the extreme of exertion by the strange hairy, malodorous thing that clung about its neck.

Solomon's mania when eating frozen meat was as nothing compared with his frenzy now that hot, dripping flesh was within his grasp. His arms were clasped about the caribou just back of its head, and as he shrieked and roared he snapped again and again at the long ears, tore at them with his teeth until the blood spurted, clung to them, and shook them as a terrier does a rat. Solomon was after his meat. He had found the caribou.

As Phil recovered from his amazement and realized that the Indian's mania had driven him to attack a bull caribou bare-handed he started at once down the slope, only to halt when still within the shelter of the brush. The herd, stopped and startled by the attack upon its leader, had turned in fresh panic and plunged through the deep snow straight toward where he was standing.

Meat! Life-giving, strengthening, saving meat, was within his grasp. There was plenty for Joyce, plenty for him, plenty for Wickson. There were three big meals a day, not two slim ones. There was food for the dogs. He could take that vigour and strength and speed, that wild, reckless energy, that was plunging up the slope toward him, harness it, store it, use it to gain safety, success, happiness.

There was a choking sensation in Phil's throat as he cocked his rifle. Solomon and his struggle were forgotten. There was a smile as he compared

his own emotions upon seeing the herd rush toward him with the Indian's when he grasped a frozen chunk of meat in his hands, but as he lifted his rifle and aimed at the largest of the animals he was thinking most of the fact that the luck had changed, that he was freed from the constant, depressing nightmare of hunger.

Once, twice, three times, he fired. Coolly, calculatingly, painstakingly, he sighted and pulled the trigger. Without hurry or excitement he plunged the lever down and back. The herd stopped. Was there danger everywhere? Which way next? And while the paralyzed animals debated Phil fired steadily until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. The gun was empty, but he had dropped four caribou with seven shots. Another was barely crawling away, would never reach the other side of the bowl.

The herd had turned and rushed back, and now it disappeared over the opposite ridge, almost in the direction in which it had come. But Phil did not see the last of them go. He had plunged down the slope at once toward the battle that still raged at the bottom.

Had the bull borne his antlers, Solomon Moses might have had a chance. The fury of his attack, the strength of his mania-driven body, the utter disregard for injury and the deep snow would have gone far, with the leverage of the horns, to bring the caribou to his knees. He might possibly have broken its neck.

But the animal's head was bare except for the two long ears, now bloody and tattered, and there was nothing to give Solomon a secure hold. Though he struck and slashed with his feet as a lynx slices with its hind claws, he accomplished nothing. His arms were clasped about the bull's neck and he could not let go.

As Phil started toward them the caribou's terror had begun to change to anger. It leaped and whirled so that the Indian was dragged through the drifts and all the time its efforts became more fierce and more varied while its opponent's strength was obviously shrinking.

But if the Indian's vigour diminished his spirit became more ferocious. As Phil came nearer he could hear the snarls and the growls, the roars of rage, the purely animal cries of a beast in its greatest ecstasy. The man snapped and tore with his teeth, striving to kill by sheer fury and impetuosity. His attack was planless, heedless, simply a blind, snarling, tearing, snapping onslaught inspired by the lust for flesh.

Phil halted twenty yards away and began slipping cartridges into his rifle. But, with his weapon ready, he hesitated. He could not fire into that

swirling, plunging mass and be sure of his mark. There was no justification for his risking himself by going closer.

As he debated what he should do one of the bull's violent lunges finally loosened Solomon's arms. The Indian hung on only by the strong grip of his teeth in a tattered ear. But as he hung there, arms groping for a new hold, the caribou struck with both forefeet. A grunt was driven from Solomon's lungs. His teeth tore loose from the dripping ear. The fur flew in a cloud from the breast of his skin coat where the sharp hoofs had struck, and the Indian went back and down into the snow.

Instantly the bull was on top of him, bellowing its rage, stamping and tearing and ripping with its hoofs. One of Solomon's arms struck up, but against those shod flails he could do nothing. In a few seconds he ceased to fight back.

Still the bull continued to strike and trample, beating and slicing the now inert body. Involuntarily Phil, his rifle forgotten, let out a roar of protest. The bull stopped, looked at him, sniffed the air and then loped off by the side of the bowl.

As Phil started forward he was stopped by the report of a gun that came from beyond the ridge. He stared unbelievably, only to hear a second, then a third and a fourth. Instantly he saw the reason for the flight of the caribou. They were being pursued by Indians when he and Solomon had met them, and the herd had been turned back upon the hunters.

As he realized what the shooting meant he became dizzy with the delight of it. He had killed the meat they needed. Now he had found the guides that were equally essential to success. Messengers to bear the news to the Fort Dease hunters, a messenger to Fort Berens, some one to take Wickson back to Savant House, all had come at once!

And the weeteego, the cause of it all! Phil did not doubt for a minute that Solomon Moses was dead but he was hardly prepared for the battered, bloody unrecognizable mass of flesh and fur that lay stretched out on the red snow. In those brief seconds he had been literally torn to pieces. The poor, crazed savage had fallen a victim to his own lust for meat.

Phil turned away to dispatch the fifth caribou, which still floundered slowly up the side of the bowl. He cut its throat and those of the other four, and when his task was finished he looked across to the opposite ridge to see four Indians standing there watching him.

That night the Indians camped with the Hudson's Bay Company people at Solomon Moses' wigwam. The meat had been dressed and hauled up. The hunters had seen what remained of Solomon Moses, and, though they never knew who he was, they were convinced that the weeteego would never again haunt Fort Dease.

Wickson had immediately taken care of operations and was busy planning and directing. In the morning they started for the nearest of the Indians' camps, ten miles to the west, and the next morning two of the men went out with the news for the other hunters of the district and to get additional dogs and men.

While Wickson chose a wigwam, Phil and Joyce decided to cook their own supper in the open that night, and it was around the campfire that Phil first learned of what the district manager had said to Joyce that noon on the trail.

"Didn't want you!" he exclaimed indignantly. "The bear! He doesn't know — —"

He stopped. Joyce was laughing.

"You would rather have him as a rival than contemptuous," she said.

Then she became suddenly serious.

"But Phil, it was a greater relief to me than to know Solomon Moses was dead, than to know we were not going to starve. Don't you see? A man like that, a man who is governed as he governs himself, who stops at nothing— why, Phil, I would always have been afraid of him, even with you."

He did not resent this, for he knew how Joyce meant it, and he had suddenly found that he had nothing except pity for Wickson.

"Poor devil," he said as he stared at the fire. "What a lonesome life he has."

Joyce smiled but she did not dispute him. After a long silence she said:

"At least his sweetheart will never grow old, or fade, or be moody."

"What do you mean?" demanded Phil indignantly.

"Nothing that you could understand in your present frame of mind. But there is something else to talk about. I am going back to Savant House with Wickson."

"With him! That long trip! Joyce, you can't!"

“I can, and I must.”

“But — —”

“I signed a contract with the Hudson’s Bay Company in London. I agreed to do certain things. Is there any reason why I should not fulfil that contract? Is there any reason why I should not be as loyal to the Company as you have been, or as Wickson is?”

“But you! You are a woman! It never was expected. Why run that risk for a fool reason?”

“Listen,” she commanded. “I told you about my father, how he had to leave Canada, how I came over here largely because I felt that I must live the life for him, do something of what he had to give up. That is the way I have always felt, that it was not I but Dad who is here, and I have tried always to do the things that I knew he would do. Do you think, otherwise, I would have had the courage to make that journey from Savant House to Dease, or that I would have dared to go out alone to find you?”

“No, Phil, I have my own ideals, and my own obligations, and I am going to fulfil them. I am going back to Savant House and give those children a year’s schooling, as I agreed to do. I have no more dread of returning with Wickson than I would of making the trip with my own father. And you have enough to keep you busy without being burdened with me. Only you must ask Wickson for a transfer. I know he will give it to you. In the summer you can come back to Savant House. Then I will be yours, not the Company’s.”

But Phil did not ask Wickson. That night the district manager summoned him to the wigwam.

“Boynton, I want you to start for Berens in the morning,” he said. “Take two teams and two men. Get supplies there and be ready to go up the bay to Fort Dease as soon as the ice permits. And as soon as you get there and take in the fur, start the Indians up the Cut-Bank to get timber for new buildings. You know what is needed. Rebuild the fort.”

Phil did not reply. He only stared at Wickson while anger and revolt engulfed him. To rebuild Fort Dease meant that he must remain there another year. It meant that he would not see Joyce for eighteen months. It meant that his opportunity to do the work he could do best was put off, perhaps indefinitely. It meant that in Wickson’s mind, it was still Penitentiary Post.

But the youth who had flaunted his contempt in the face of Borthwick the winter before was not there in the wigwam with Wickson. Something had driven out the heedlessness and the recklessness and the impetuosity. Something had widened his vision, had tempered his ideas. Duty and responsibility had assumed a new significance. They were no longer shadowed by personal desires or aversions.

“Very well,” Phil said, and he turned and went out.

The first of July Phil arrived at the mouth of the Cut-Bank River, at the site of what had been Fort Dease. The supplies were unloaded and stored in tents brought for the purpose. Soon afterward the Indians came with their fur. Phil remembered their debts as best he could and settled accounts. Then he sent the entire band up the river for timber and dispatched the boats to Fort Berens with the fur and for more supplies. For the second time he was left alone in monotonous, desolate Penitentiary Post.

July passed and August came. One evening while Phil was cooking supper before his tent he heard a call from the river bank and rushed out to see a white man and two Indians coming toward him.

“Hello, Boynton,” said the stranger as he extended his hand. “I’m Morris, from Savant House. Passed your Indians with the rafts several days ago. Here’s your mail.”

With scant courtesy for his guest, Phil opened the flat bag and drew out two letters. One was in the same writing that he had found that March morning upon his return from Solomon Moses’ shore camp. The other was addressed with a typewriter and bore the seal of the Company.

“You’ll pardon me, old man,” he managed to say as he tore open the first envelope. “Long time since mail day, you know.” Morris grinned, knowingly.

But Phil was already looking at the letter. The first page was all right, the tenth, and the thirtieth. Joyce was safe.

He tore open the second. This was one sheet, typewritten. He read:

I am leaving in the morning for the Mackenzie River, where I take charge of a new district. My successor will be here in the fall. Before leaving I have sent Mr. Morris to take charge of Fort Dease. You are to return at once to Savant House. Mr. Osborne has obtained a transfer to a

post on the new railroad in Ontario so that he may send the children to school. You are to succeed him as manager here. Please act upon these instructions at once.

JOHN WICKSON.

P.S.—The missionary arrived last week with a broken leg. If you hurry you can reach here before he is able to leave.

THE END



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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 *Penitentiary Post*, by Kathrene and Robert Pinkerton.]