THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

RIDGWELL CULLUM

THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

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THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

BY

RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF "THE NIGHT-RIDERS," ETC., ETC.

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THE HOUND FROM THE NORTH

CHAPTER I

IN THE MOUNTAINS

A PALLID sun, low, gleaming just over a rampart of mountain-tops. Sundogs—heralds of stormy weather—fiercely staring, like sentries, upon either hand of the mighty sphere of light. Vast glaciers shimmering jewel-like in the steely light of the semi-Arctic evening. Black belts of gloomy pinewoods on the lower slopes of the mountains; the trees snow-burdened, but black with the darkness of the night in their melancholy depths. The earth white; snow to the thickness of many feet on all. Life none; not a beast of the earth, nor a fowl of the air, nor the hum of an insect. Solitude. Cold—grey, pitiless cold. Night is approaching.

The hill ranges which backbone the American continent—the northern extremity of the Rocky Mountains. The barrier which confronts the traveller as he journeys from the Yukon Valley to the Alaskan seaboard. Land where the foot of man but rarely treads. And mid-winter.

But now, in the dying light of day, a man comes slowly, painfully into the picture. What an atom in that infinity of awful grandeur. One little life in all that desert of snow and ice. And what a life! The poor wretch was swathed in furs; snow-shoes on his feet, and a long staff lent his drooping figure support. His whole attitude told its own tale of exhaustion. But a closer inspection, one glance into the fierce-burning eyes, which glowered from the depths of two cavernous sockets, would have added a sequel of starvation. The eyes had a frenzied look in them, the look of a man without hope, but with

still that instinct of life burning in his brain. Every now and again he raised one mitted hand and pressed it to nose and cheeks. He knew his face was frozen, but he had no desire to stop to thaw it out. He was beyond such trifles. His upturned storm-collar had become massed with icicles about his mouth, and the fur was frozen solidly to his chin whisker, but he gave the matter no heed.

The man tottered on, still onward with the dogged persistence which the inborn love of life inspires. He longed to rest, to seat himself upon the snow just where he happened to be, to indulge that craving for sleep which was upon him. His state of exhaustion fostered these feelings, and only his brain fought for him and clung to life. He knew what that drowsy sensation meant. He was slowly freezing. To rest meant sleep—to sleep meant death.

Slowly he dragged himself up the inclining ledge he was traversing. The path was low at the base of one of the loftiest crags. It wound its way upwards in such a fashion that he could see little more than fifty yards ahead of him ere it turned away to the left as it skirted the hill. He was using his last reserve of strength, and he knew it. At the top he stood half dazed. The mountain rose sheer up to dizzy heights on one side, and a precipice was on the other. He turned his dreadful eyes this way and that. Then he scanned the prospect before him—a haze of dimly-outlined mountains. He glanced back, tracing his uneven tracks until they disappeared in the grey evening light. Then he turned back again to a contemplation of what lay before him. Suddenly his staff slipped from his hand as though he no longer had the strength to grip it. Then, raising his arms aloft, he gave vent to one despairing cry in which was expressed all the pent-up agony of his soul. It was the cry of one from whom all hope had gone.

"God! God have mercy on me! I am lost—lost!"

The despairing note echoed and re-echoed among the hills. And as each echo came back to his dulled ears it was as though some invisible being mocked him. Suddenly he braced himself, and his mind obtained a momentary triumph over his physical weakness. He stooped

to recover his staff. His limbs refused to obey his will. He stumbled. Then he crumpled and fell in a heap upon the snow.

All was silent, and he lay quite still. Death was gripping him, and he knew it. Presently he wearily raised his head. He gazed about him with eyelids more than half closed. "Is it worth the struggle?" he seemed to ask; "is there any hope?" He felt so warm, so comfortable out there in the bitter winter air. Where had been the use of his efforts? Where the use of the gold he had so laboriously collected at the new Eldorado? At the thought of his gold his spirit tried to rouse him from the sleep with which he was threatened. His eyelids opened wide, and his eyes, from which intelligence was fast disappearing, rolled in their gaunt sockets. His body heaved as though he were about to rise, but beyond that he did not move.

As he lay there a sound reached his numbed ears. Clear through the crisp night air it came with the keenness and piercing incision which is only obtained in the still air of such latitudes. It was a human cry: a long-drawn "whoop." Like his own cry, it echoed amongst the hills. It only needed such as this to support the inclinations of the sufferer's will. His head was again raised. And in his wild eyes was a look of alertness—hope. He listened. He counted the echoes as they came. Then, with an almost superhuman effort, he struggled to his feet. New life had come to him born of hope. His weakened frame answered to his great effort. His heart was throbbing wildly.

As he stood up the cry came to him again, nearer this time. He moved forward and rounded the bend in the path. Again the cry. Now just ahead of him. He answered it with joy in his tone and shambled on. Now two dark figures loomed up in the grey twilight. They were moving swiftly along the ledge towards him. They cried out something in a foreign tongue. He did not understand, but his joy was no less. They came up, and he saw before him the short, stout figures of two fur-clad Eskimos. He was saved.

* * * * * * *

Inside a small dugout a dingy oil lamp shed its murky

rays upon squalid surroundings. The place was reeking with the offensive odours exhaled from the burning oil. The atmosphere was stifling.

There were four occupants of this abode, and, stretched in various attitudes on dusty blankets spread upon the ground, they presented a strange picture. Two of these were Eskimos. The broad, flat faces, sharp noses, and heavy lips were unmistakable, as were their dusky, greasy skins and squat figures. A third man was something between the white-man and the redskin. He was in the nature of a half-breed, and, though not exactly pleasant to look upon, he was certainly interesting as a study. He was lying with limbs outstretched and his head propped upon one hand, while his gaze was directed with thoughtful intensity towards a small, fierce-burning camp-stove, which, at that moment, was rendering the hut so unbearably hot.

His face was sallow, and indented with smallpox scars. He had no hair upon it, except a tuft or two of eyebrows, which the ravages of disease had condescended to leave to him. His nose, which was his best feature, was beaky, but beautifully aquiline; but his mouth was wide, with a lower lip that sagged loosely from its fellow above. His head was small, and was burdened with a crown of lank black hair which had been allowed to grow Indian-like until it hung upon his shoulders. He was of medium height, and his arms were of undue length.

The other occupant of the dugout was our traveller. He was stretched upon a blanket, on which was spread his fur coat; and he was alternating between the disposal of a bowl of steaming soup and groaning with the racking pains caused by his recently thawed-out frost-bites.

The soup warmed his starving body, and his pain increased proportionately. In spite of the latter, however, he felt very much alive. Occasionally he glanced round upon his silent companions. Whenever he did so one or the other, or both of the Eskimos were gazing stolidly at him.

He was rather a good-looking man, notwithstanding his now unkempt appearance. His eyes were large—very large in their hollow sockets. His nose and cheeks were, at present, a mass of blisters from the thawing

frost-bites, and his mouth and chin were hidden behind a curtain of whisker of about three weeks' growth. There was no mistaking him for anything but an Anglo-Saxon, and a man of considerable and very fine proportions.

When his soup was finished he set the bowl down and leaned back with a sigh. The pock-marked man glanced over at him.

"More?" he said, in a deep, not unmusical, tone.

The half-starved traveller nodded, and his eyes sparkled. One of the Eskimos rose and re-filled the bowl from a tin camp-kettle which stood on the stove. The famished man took it and at once began to sup the invigorating liquid. The agonies of his frost-bites were terrible, but the pangs of hunger were greater. By and by the bowl was set down empty.

The half-breed sat up and crossed his legs, and leant his body against two sacks which contained something that crackled slightly under his weight.

"Give you something more solid in an hour or so. Best not have it too soon," he said, speaking slowly, but with good enunciation.

"Not now?" said the traveller, in a disappointed tone.

The other shook his head.

"We're all going to have supper then. Best wait." Then, after a pause: "Where from?"

"Forty Mile Creek," said the other.

"You don't say! Alone?"

There was a curious saving of words in this man's mode of speech. Possibly he had learned this method from his Indian associates.

The traveller nodded.

"Yes."

"Where to?"

"The sea-coast."

The half-breed laughed gutturally.

"Forty Mile Creek. Sea-coast. On foot. Alone. Winter. You must be mad."

The traveller shook his head.

"Not mad. I could have done it, only I lost my way. I had all my stages thought out carefully. I tramped from the sea-coast originally. Where am I now?"

The half-breed eyed the speaker curiously. He seemed to think well before he answered. Then—

"Within a few miles of the Pass. To the north."

An impressive silence followed. The half-breed continued to eye the sick man, and, to judge from the expression of his face, his thoughts were not altogether unpleasant. He watched the weary face before him until the eyes gradually closed, and, in spite of the burning pains of the frost-bites, exhaustion did its work, and the man slept. He waited for some moments listening to the heavy, regular breathing, then he turned to his companions and spoke long and earnestly in a curious tongue. One of the Eskimos rose and removed a piece of bacon from a nail in the wall. This he placed in the camp-kettle on the stove. Then he took a tin billy and dipped it full from a bucket containing beans that had been set to soak. These also went into the camp-kettle. Then the fellow threw himself down again upon his blankets, and, for some time, the three men continued to converse in low tones. They glanced frequently at the sleeper, and occasionally gurgled out a curious throaty chuckle. Their whole attitude was furtive, and the man slept on.

An hour passed—two. The third was more than half gone. The hut reeked with the smell of cooking victuals. The Eskimos, who seemed to act as cook, occasionally looked into the camp-kettle. The other two were lying on their blankets, sometimes conversing, but more often silent, gazing stolidly before them. At length the cook uttered a sharp ejaculation and lifted the steaming kettle from its place on the stove. Then he produced four deep pannikins from a sack, and four greasy-looking spoons. From another he produced a pile of biscuits. "Hard tack," well known on the northern trails.

Supper was ready, and the pock-marked man leant over and roused the traveller.

"Food," he said laconically, as the startled sleeper rubbed his eyes.

The man sat up and gazed hungrily at the iron pot. The Indian served out the pork with ruthless hands. A knife divided the piece into four, and he placed one in each pannikin. Then he poured the beans and soup

over each portion. The biscuits were placed within reach, and the supper was served.

The sick man devoured his uncouth food with great relish. The soup which had been first given him had done him much good, and now the "solid" completed the restoration so opportunely begun. He was a vigorous man, and his exhaustion had chiefly been brought about by lack of food. Now, as he sat with his empty pannikin in front of him, he looked gratefully over at his rescuers, and slowly munched some dry biscuit, and sipped occasionally from a great beaker of black coffee. Life was very sweet to him at that moment, and he thought joyfully of the belt inside his clothes laden with the golden result of his labours on Forty Mile Creek.

Now the half-breed turned to him.

"Feeling pretty good?" he observed, conversationally.

"Yes, thanks to you and your friends. You must let me pay you for this." The suggestion was coarsely put. Returning strength was restoring the stranger to his usual condition of mind. There was little refinement about this man from the Yukon.

The other waived the suggestion.

"Sour-belly's pretty good tack when y' can't get any better. Been many days on the road?"

"Three weeks." The traveller was conscious of three pairs of eyes fixed upon his face.

"Hoofing right along?"

"Yes. I missed the trail nearly a week back. Followed the track of a dog-train. It came some distance this way. Then I lost it."

"Ah! Food ran out, maybe."

The half-breed had now turned away, and was gazing at the stove as though it had a great fascination for him.

"Yes, I meant to make the Pass where I could lay in a fresh store. Instead of that I wandered on till I found the empty pack got too heavy, then I left it."

"Left it?" The half-breed raised his two little tufts of eyebrows, but his eyes remained staring at the stove.

"Oh, it was empty—clean empty. You see, I didn't trust anything but food in my pack."

"No. That's so. Maybe gold isn't safe in a pack?"

The pock-marked face remained turned towards the glowing stove. The man's manner was quite indifferent. It suggested that he merely wished to talk.

The traveller seemed to draw back into his shell at the mention of gold. A slight pause followed.

"Maybe you ain't been digging up there?" the half-breed went on presently.

"It's rotten bad digging on the Creek," the traveller said, clumsily endeavouring to evade the question.

"So I've heard," said the half-breed.

He had produced a pipe, and was leisurely filling it from a pouch of antelope hide. His two companions did the same. The stranger took his pipe from his fur coat pocket and cut some tobacco from a plug. This he offered to his companions, but it was rejected in favour of their own.

"The only thing I've had—that and my fur coat—to keep me from freezing to death for more than four days. Haven't so much as seen a sign of life since I lost the dog track."

"This country's a terror," observed the half-breed emphatically.

All four men lit their pipes. The sick man only drew once or twice at his, then he laid it aside. The process of smoking caused the blisters on his face to smart terribly.

"Gives you face gyp," said the half-breed, sympathetically. "Best not bother to smoke to-night."

He pulled vigorously at his own pipe, and the two Indians followed suit. And gradually a pleasant odour, not of tobacco but some strange perfume, disguised the reek of the atmosphere. It was pungent but delightful, and the stranger remarked upon it.

"What's that you are smoking?" he asked.

For one instant the half-breed's eyes were turned upon him with a curious look. Then he turned back to the contemplation of the stove.

"Kind o' weed that grows around these wilds," he answered. "Only stuff we get hereabouts. It's good when you're used to it." He laughed quietly.

The stranger looked from one to the other of his three companions. He was struck by a sudden thought.

"What do you do here? I mean for a living?"

"Trap," replied the Breed shortly.

"Many furs about?"

"Fair."

"Slow work," said the stranger, indifferently.

Then a silence fell. The wayfarer was getting very drowsy. The pungent odour from his companion's pipes seemed to have a strangely soothing effect upon him. Before he was aware of it he caught himself nodding, and, try as he would, he could not keep his heavy eyelids open. The men smoked on in silence. Three pairs of eyes watched the stranger's efforts to keep awake, and a malicious gleam was in the look with which they surveyed him. He was too sleepy to observe. Besides, had he been in condition to do so, the expression of their eyes would probably have been different. Slowly his head drooped forward. He was dreaming pleasantly already, although, as yet, he was not quite asleep. Now he no longer attempted to keep his eyes open. Further his head drooped forward. The three men were still as mice. Then suddenly he rolled over on one side, and his stertorous breathing indicated a deep, unnatural slumber.

* * * * * * *

The hut was in darkness but for a beam of light which made its way in through a narrow slit over the door. The sunlight shone down upon the huddled figure of the traveller, who still slept in the attitude in which he had rolled over on his fur coat when sleep had first overcome him. Otherwise the hut was empty. The half-breed and his companions had disappeared. The fire was out. The lamp had burned itself out. The place was intensely cold.

Suddenly the sleeper stirred. He straightened himself out and turned over. Then, without further warning, he sat up and found himself staring up at the dazzling streak of light.

"Daylight," he murmured; "and they've let the stove go out. Gee! but I feel queer about the head."

Moving his head so that his eyes should miss the glare of light, he gazed about him. He was alone, and as he realized this he scrambled to his feet, and, for the moment, the room—everything about him—seemed to be turning

topsy-turvy. He placed his hand against the post which supported the roof and steadied himself.

"I wonder where they are?" he muttered. "Ah! of course," as an afterthought, "they are out at their traps. They might have stoked the fire. It's perishing in here. I feel beastly queer; must be the effects of starvation."

Then he moved a step forward. He brought up suddenly to a standstill. His two hands went to his waist. They moved, groping round it spasmodically. Undoing his clothes he passed his hands into his shirt. Then one word escaped him. One word—almost a whisper—but conveying such a world of fierce, horror-stricken intensity—

"Robbed!"

And the look which accompanied his exclamation was the look of a man whose mind is distracted.

So he stood for some seconds. His lips moved, but no words escaped them. His hand remained within his shirt, and his fingers continued to grope about mechanically. And all the time the dazed, strained look burned in his great, roving eyes.

It was gone. That broad belt, weighted down with the result of one year's toil, gold dust and nuggets, was gone. Presently he seated himself on the cold iron of the stove. Thus he sat for an hour, looking straight before him with eyes that seemed to draw closer together, so intense was their gaze. And who shall say what thoughts he thought; what wild schemes of revenge he planned? There was no outward sign. Just those silent moving lips.

CHAPTER II

MR. ZACHARY SMITH

"ROT, man, rot! I've been up here long enough to know my way about this devil's country. No confounded neche can teach me. The trail forked at that bush we passed three days back. We're all right. I wish I felt as sure about the weather."

Leslie Grey broke off abruptly. His tone was resentful, as well as dictatorial. He was never what one might call an easy man. He was always headstrong, and never failed to resent interference on the smallest provocation. Perhaps these things were in the nature of his calling. He was one of the head Customs officials on the Canadian side of the Alaskan boundary. His companion was a subordinate.

The latter was a man of medium height, and from the little that could be seen of his face between the high folds of the storm-collar of his buffalo coat, he possessed a long nose and a pair of dark, keen, yet merry eyes. His name was Robb Chillingwood. The two men were tramping along on snow-shoes in the rear of a dog-train. An Indian was keeping pace with the dogs in front; the latter, five in number, harnessed in the usual tandem fashion to a heavily-laden sled.

"It's no use anticipating bad weather," replied Chillingwood, quietly. "But as to the question of the trail——"

"There's no question," interrupted Grey, sharply.

"Ah, the map shows two clumps of bush. The trail turns off at one of them. My chart says the second. I studied it carefully. The 'confounded neche,' as you call him, says 'not yet.' Which means that he considers it to be the second bush. You say no."

"The neche only knows the trail by repute. You

have never been over it before. I have travelled it six times. You make me tired. Give it a rest. Perhaps you can make something of those nasty, sharp puffs of wind which keep lifting the ground snow at intervals."

Robb shrugged his fur-coated shoulders, and glanced up at the sun. It seemed to be struggling hard to pierce a grey haze which hung over the mountains. The sun-dogs, too, could be seen, but, like the sun itself, they were dim and glowed rather than shone. That patchy wind, so well known in the west of Canada, was very evident just then. It seemed to hit the snow-bound earth, slither viciously along the surface, sweep up a thin cloud of loose surface snow, then drop in an instant, but only to operate in the same manner at some other spot. This was going on spasmodically in many directions, the snow brushing up in hissing eddies at each attack. And slowly the grey mist on the hills was obscuring the sun.

Robb Chillingwood was a man of some experience on the prairie, although, as his companion had said, he was new to this particular mountain trail. To his trained eye the outlook was not encouraging.

"Storm," he observed shortly.

"That's my opinion," said Grey definitely.

"According to calculations, if we have not got off the trail," Chillingwood went on, with a sly look at his superior, "we should reach Dougal's roadside hostelry in the Pass by eight o'clock—well before dark. We ought to escape the storm."

"You mean we shall," said Grey pointedly.

"If——"

"Bunkum!"

The two men relapsed into silence. They were very good friends these two. Both were used to the strenuous northern winter. Both understood the dangers of a blizzard. Their argument about the trail they were on was quite a friendly one. It was only the dictatorial manner of Leslie Grey which gave it the appearance of a quarrel. Chillingwood understood him, and took no notice of his somewhat irascible remarks, whilst, for himself, he remained of opinion that he had read his Ordnance chart aright.

They tramped on. Each man, with a common thought,

was watching the weather indications. As the time passed the wind " patches " grew in size, in force, and in frequency of recurrence. The haze upon the surrounding hills rapidly deepened, and the air was full of frost particles. A storm was coming on apace. Nor was Dougal's wayside hostelry within sight.

" It's a rotten life on the boundary," said Robb, as though continuing a thought aloud.

" It's not so much the life," replied Grey vindictively, " it's the d——d red tape that demands the half-yearly journey down country. That's the dog's part of our business. Why can't they establish a branch bank up here for the bullion and send all ' returns ' by mail ? There is a postal service—of a kind. It's a one-horsed lay-out—Government work. There'll come a rush to the Yukon valley this year, and when there's a chance of doing something for ourselves—having done all we can for the Government—I suppose they'll shift us. It's the way of Governments. I'm sick of it. I draw four thousand dollars a year, and I earn every cent of it. You——"

" Draw one thousand, and think myself lucky if I taste fresh vegetables once a week during the summer. Say, Leslie, do you think it's possible to assimilate the humble but useful hog by means of a steady diet of ' sourbelly ' ? "

Grey laughed.

" If that were possible I guess we ought to make the primest bacon. Hallo, here comes the d——d neche. What's up now, I wonder ? Well, Rainy-Moon, what is it ? "

The Indian had stopped his dogs and now turned back to speak to the two men. His face was expressionless. He was a tall specimen of the Cree Indian.

" Ugh," he grunted, as he came to a standstill. Then he stretched out his arm with a wide sweep in the direction of the mountains. " No good, white-men—coyote, yes. So," and he pointed to the south and made a motion of running, " yes. Plenty beef, plenty fire-water. White-man store." His face slowly expanded into a smile. Then the smile died out suddenly and he turned to the north and made a long ' soo-o-o-sh ' with rising intona-

tion, signifying the rising wind. "Him very bad. White-man sleep—sleep. Wake—no." And he finished up with a shake of the head.

Then his arm dropped to his side, and he waited for Grey to speak. For a moment the Customs officer remained silent. Chillingwood waited anxiously. Both men understood the Indian's meaning. Chillingwood believed the man to be right about the trail. As to the coming storm, and the probable consequences if they were caught in it, that was patent to all three.

But Grey, with characteristic pigheadedness, gave no heed to the superior intelligence of the Indian where matters of direction in a wild country were concerned. He *knew* he was on the right trail. That was sufficient for him. But he surveyed the surrounding mountains well before he spoke. They had halted in a sort of cup-like hollow, with towering sides surmounted by huge glaciers down which the wind was now whistling with vicious force. There were only two exits from this vast arena. The one by which the travellers had entered it, and the other directly ahead of them; the latter was only to be approached by a wide ledge which skirted one of the mountains and inclined sharply upwards. Higher up the mountain slope was a belt of pinewoods, close to which was a stubbly growth of low bush. This was curiously black in contrast with the white surroundings, for no snow was upon its weedy branches and shrivelled, discoloured leaves. Suddenly, while Grey was looking out beyond the dog-train, he observed the impress of snow-shoes in the snow. He pointed to them and drew his companion's attention.

"You see," he said triumphantly, "there has been some one passing this way just ahead of us. Look here, neche, you just get right on and don't let me have any more nonsense about the trail."

The Indian shook his head.

"Ow," he grunted. "This little—just little." Then he pointed ahead. "Big, white—all white. No, no; white-man no come dis way. Bimeby neche so," and Rainy-Moon made a motion of lying down and sleeping. He meant that they would get lost and die in the snow.

Grey became angry.

"Get on," he shouted. And Rainy-Moon reluctantly turned and started his dogs afresh.

The little party ascended the sloping path. The whipping snow lashed their faces as the wind rushed it up from the ground in rapidly thickening clouds. The fierce gusts were concentrating into a steady shrieking blast. A grey cloud of snow, thin as yet, but plainly perceptible, was in the air. The threat it conveyed was no idle one. The terror of the blizzard was well known to those people. And they knew that in a short space they would have to seek what shelter they might chance to find upon these almost barren mountains.

The white-men tightened the woollen scarves about the storm-collars of their coats, and occasionally beat their mitted hands against their sides. The gathering wind was intensifying the cold.

"If this goes on we shall have to make that belt of pinewoods for shelter," observed Robb Chillingwood practically. "It won't do to take chances of losing the dogs—and their load—in the storm. What say?"

They had rounded a bend and Grey was watchfully gazing ahead. He did not seem to hear his companion's question. Suddenly he pointed directly along the path towards a point where it seemed to vanish between two vast crags.

"Smoke," he said. And his tone conveyed that he wished his companion to understand that he, Grey, had been right about the trail, and that Robb had been wrong. "That's Dougal's store," he went on, after a slight pause.

Chillingwood looked as directed. He saw the rush of smoke which, in the rising storm, was ruthlessly swept from the mouth of a piece of upright stove-pipe, which in the now grey surroundings could just be distinguished.

"But I thought there was a broad, open trail at Dougal's," he said, at last, after gazing for some moments at the tiny smoke-stack.

"Maybe the road opens out here," answered Grey weakly.

But it didn't. Instead it narrowed. And as they ascended the slope it became more and more precipitous. The storm was now beating up, seemingly from every

direction, and it was with difficulty that the five great huskies hauled their burden in the face of it. However, Rainy-Moon urged them to their task with no light hand, and just as the storm settled down to its work in right good earnest they drew up abreast of a small dugout. The path had narrowed down to barely six feet in width, bordered on the left hand by a sharp slope upwards towards the pinewood belt above, and on the right by a sheer precipice; whilst fifty feet further on there was no more path—just space. As this became apparent to him, Robb Chillingwood could not help wondering what their fate might have been had the storm overtaken them earlier, and they had not come upon the dugout. However, he had no time for much speculation on the subject, for, as the dogs came to a stand, the door of the dugout was thrown back and a tall, cadaverous-looking man stood framed in the opening.

"Kind o' struck it lucky," he observed, without any great show of enthusiasm. "Come right in. The neche can take the dogs round the side there," pointing to the left of the dugout. "There's a weatherproof shack there where I keep my kindling. Guess he can fix up in that till this d——d breeze has blown itself out. You've missed the trail, I take it. Come right in."

Half-an-hour later the two Customs officers were seated with their host round the camp-stove which stood hissing and spluttering in the centre of the hut. The dogs and Rainy-Moon were housed in the woodshed.

Now that the travellers were divested of their heavy furs, their appearance was less picturesque but more presentable. Robb Chillingwood was about twenty-five; his whole countenance indexed a sturdy honesty of thought and a merry disposition. There was considerable strength too about brow and jaw. Leslie Grey was shorter than his companion. A man of dapper, sturdy figure, and with a face good-looking, obstinate, and displaying as much sense of humour as a barbed-wire fence post. He was fully thirty years of age.

Their host possessed a long, attenuated, but powerful figure, and a face chiefly remarkable for its cadaverous hollows and a pair of hungry eyes and a dark chin-whisker.

"Yes, sir," this individual was saying, "she's goin' to howl good and hard for the next forty-eight hours, or I don't know these parts. Maybe you're from the valley?"

Chillingwood shook his head.

"No. Fort Cudahy way," he said. "My name's Chillingwood—Robb Chillingwood. This is Mr. Leslie Grey, Customs officer. I am his assistant."

The long man glanced slowly at his guests. His great eyes seemed to take in the details of each man's appearance with solemn curiosity. Then he twisted slowly upon the upturned box on which he was seated and crossed his legs.

"I'm pleased to meet you, gentlemen. It's lonely in these parts—lonely." He shuddered as though with cold. "I've been trapping in these latitudes for a considerable period, and it's—lonely. My name is Zachary Smith."

As the trapper pronounced his name he glanced keenly from one to the other of the two men beside him. His look was suggestive of doubt. He seemed to be trying to reassure himself that he had never before crossed the paths of these chance guests of his. After a moment of apprehensive silence he went on slowly, like one groping in darkness. His confidence was not fully established.

"You can make up your minds to a couple of days in this shanty—anyhow. I mostly live on 'sour-belly' and 'hard tack.' Don't sound inviting, eh?"

Chillingwood laughed pleasantly.

"We're Government officials," he said with meaning.

"Yes," put in Grey. "But we've got plenty of canned truck in our baggage. I'm thinking you may find our supplies a pleasant change."

"No doubt—no doubt whatever. Cat's meat would be a delicacy after—months of tallowy pork."

This slow-spoken trapper surveyed his guests thoughtfully. The travellers were enjoying the comforting shelter and warmth. Neither of them seemed particularly talkative.

Presently Grey roused himself. Extreme heat after extreme cold always has a somnolent effect on those who experience it.

"We'd best get the—stuff off the sleigh, Chillingwood," said he. "Rainy-Moon's above the average Indian for honesty, but, nevertheless, we don't need to take chances. And," as the younger man rose and stretched himself, "food is good on occasions. What does Mr. Zachary Smith say?"

"Ay, let's sample some white-man's grub. Gentlemen, this is a fortunate meeting—all round."

Chillingwood passed out of the hut. As he opened the door a vindictive blast of wind swept a cloud of snow in, and the frozen particles fell crackling and hissing upon the glowing stove.

"And they call this a white-man's country," observed Mr. Smith pensively, as the door closed again. He opened the stove and proceeded to knock the embers together preparatory to stoking up afresh.

"Guess you were making for the Pass," he said conversationally.

"Yes," replied Grey.

"Missed the trail," the other said, pitching a cordwood stick accurately into the centre of the glowing embers.

Grey made no answer.

"'Tisn't in the way of Governments to show consideration to their servants," Mr. Smith went on, filling the stove with fuel to the limit of its holding capacity. "It's a deadly season to be forced to travel about in."

"Consideration," said Grey bitterly. "I'm forced to undertake this journey twice a year. Which means I am on the road the best part of my time. And merely because there is no bank or authorized place for depositing——"

"Ah, gold," put in Mr. Zachary Smith quietly.

"And reams of 'returns.'"

"They reckon that the 'rush' to the Yukon'll come next year. Maybe things will alter then."

Smith straightened himself up from his occupation. His face displayed but the most ordinary interest in the conversation.

At that moment Chillingwood returned bearing two small brass-bound chests. The Indian followed him bringing a number of packages of tinned food. Smith glanced from the chests—which were as much as Chilling-

wood could carry—to the angular proportions of the Indian's burden, then back again to the chests. He watched furtively as the officer deposited the latter; then he turned back to the stove and opened the damper.

Then followed a meal of which all three partook with that heartiness which comes of an appetite induced by a hardy open-air life. They talked but little while they ate, and that little was of the prospects of the new Eldorado. Leslie Grey spoke with the bitterness of a disappointed man. In reality he had been successful in the business he had adopted. But some men are born grumblers, and he was one. It is probable that had he been born a prince he would have loudly lamented the fact that he was not a king. Chillingwood was different; he accepted the situation and enjoyed his life. He was unambitious whilst faithfully doing that which he regarded as his duty, first to himself, then to his employers. His method of life was something like that of the sailor. He fully appreciated the motto of the seafaring gentry —one hand for himself and one for his employers. When in doubt both hands for self. He meant to break away from his present employment when the Yukon "rush" came. In the meantime he was on the spot. Mr. Zachary Smith chiefly listened. He could eat and watch his guests. He could study them. And he seemed in no way inclined to waste his time on words when he could do the other two things. He said little about himself, and was mainly contented with comprehensive nods and grunts, whilst he devoured huge portions of tinned tongue and swallowed bumpers of scalding tea.

After dinner the travellers produced their pipes. Grey offered his tobacco to their hosts. Mr. Zachary Smith shook his head.

"Given up tobacco—mostly," he said, glancing in the direction of the door, which groaned under a sudden attack from the storm which was now howling with terrible force outside. "It isn't that I don't like it. But when a man gets cooped up in these hills he's like to run out of it, and then it's uncomfortable. I've taken on a native weed which does me for smoking when I need it—which isn't often. It grows hereabouts and isn't likely to give out. Guess I won't smoke now."

Grey shrugged and lit his pipe. If any man could be fool enough to reject tobacco, Leslie Grey was not the sort of man to press him. He was intolerant of ideas in any one but himself. Chillingwood sucked luxuriously at his pipe and thought big things.

The blue smoke clouds curled insinuatingly about the heads of the smokers, and rose heavily upon the dense atmosphere of the hut. The two men stretched themselves indolently upon the ground, sometimes speaking, but, for the most part, silent. These wayfarers thought little of time. They had a certain task to perform which, the elements permitting, they would carry out in due course. In the meantime it was storming, and they had been fortunate in finding shelter in these wastes of snow and ice; they were glad to accept what comfort came their way. This enforced delay would find a simple record in Leslie Grey's report to his superiors. "Owing to a heavy storm, etc." They were Government servants. The routine of these men's lives was all very monotonous, but they were used to it, and use is a wonderful thing. It so closely borders on content.

Cards were produced later on. Mr. Zachary Smith resisted the blandishments of "cut-throat" euchre. He had no money to spare for gambling, he informed his guests; he would look on. He sat over the stove whilst the others played. Later on the cards were put away, and the travellers, curling themselves into their blankets, composed themselves to sleep.

The lean figure sat silently blinking at the red sides of the fire-box. His legs were crossed, and he nursed his knee in a restful embrace. For nearly an hour he sat thus, and only the slow movement of his great rolling eyes, and an occasional inclination of his head told of the active thought which was passing behind his mask-like features.

As he sat there he looked older by half a score of years than either of his companions, but, in reality, he was a young man. The furrows and hollows upon his face were the marks of privation and exposure, not of age. His bowed figure was not the result of weakness or senility, it was chiefly the result of great height and the slouching gait of one who has done much slow tramping. Mr.

Zachary Smith made an interesting study as he sat silently beside his stove.

His face was the face of an honest man—when his eyes were concealed beneath their heavy lids. It was a good face, and refined; tough, vigorous, honest, until the eyelids were raised. Then the expression was utterly changed. A something looked out from those great rolling eyeballs which was furtive, watchful, doubtful. They were eyes one sometimes sees in a madman or a great criminal. And now, as he sat absorbed in his own reflections, their gaze alternated between the two brass-bound chests and the recumbent figure of Leslie Grey.

So he sat, this self-styled Zachary Smith, trapper.

CHAPTER III

MR. ZACHARY SMITH SMOKES

It was the third morning of the travellers' sojourn in Mr. Smith's dugout. Two long idle days had been spent in the fœtid atmosphere of the trapper's half-buried house. During their enforced stay neither Grey nor his subordinates had learnt much of their reticent host. It is doubtful if they had troubled themselves much about him. He had greeted them with a sort of indifferent hospitality, and they were satisfied. It was not in the nature of their work to question the characters of those whom they encountered upon their journey. To all that he had Mr. Zachary Smith had made them welcome; they could expect no more, they needed no more. Now the day had arrived for their departure, for the storm had subsided and the sun was shining with all its wintry splendour.

The three men leisurely devoured an early morning breakfast.

Mr. Smith was quite cheerful. He seemed to be labouring under some strange excitement. He looked better, too, since the advent of his guests. Perhaps it was the result of the ample supplies of canned provisions which the two men had lavished unsparingly upon him. His face was less cadaverous; the deep searing furrows were less pronounced. Altogether there was a marked improvement in this solitary dweller in the wild. Now he was discussing the prospects of the weather, whilst he partook liberally of the food set before him.

"These things aren't like most storms," he said. "They blow themselves out and have done with it. They don't come back on you with a change of wind. That isn't the way of the blizzard. We've got a clear spell

of a fortnight and more before us—with luck. Now, which way may you be taking, gentlemen? are you going to head through the mountains for the main trail, or are you going to double on your tracks?"

"We are going back," said Grey, with unpleasant emphasis. Any allusion to his mistake of the road annoyed him.

Chillingwood turned his head away and hid a smile.

"I think you will do well," replied the trapper largely. "I know these hills, and I should be inclined to hark back to where you missed the trail. I hope to cover twenty miles myself to-day."

"Your traps will be buried, I should say," suggested Robb.

"I'm used to that," replied the tall man quietly. "Guess I shan't have much difficulty with 'em." He permitted himself the suspicion of a smile.

Grey drew out his pipe, and leisurely loaded it. Robb followed suit. Mr. Zachary Smith pushed his tin pannikin away from before him and leaned back.

"Going to smoke?" he asked. "Guess I'll join you. No, not your plug, thanks. I'm feeling pretty good. My weed 'll do me. You don't fancy to try it?"

"T. and B.'s good enough for me," said Grey, with a smile. "No, I won't experiment."

Smith held his pouch towards Chillingwood.

"Can I?"

Robb shook his head with a doubtful smile.

"Guess not, thanks. What's good enough for my chief is good enough for me."

The trapper slowly unfolded an antelope-hide pouch of native workmanship. He emptied out a little pile of greenish-brown flakes into the palm of his hand. It was curious, dusty-looking stuff, suggestive of discoloured bran. This he poured into the bowl of a well-worn briar, the mouthpiece of which he carefully and with accuracy adjusted into the corner of his mouth.

"If you ever chance to have the experience I have had in these mountains, gentlemen," he then went on slowly, as gathering into the palm of his hand a red-hot cinder from the stove he tossed it to and fro until it lodged on the bowl of his pipe, "I think you'll find the

use of the weed which grows on this hillside," with a jerk of his head upwards to indicate the bush which flourished in that direction, "has its advantages."

"Maybe," said Grey contemptuously.

"I doubt it," said Robb, with a pleasant smile.

The lean man knocked the cinder from his pipe and emitted a cloud of pungent smoke from between his lips. The others had lit up. But the odour of the trapper's weed quickly dominated the atmosphere. He talked rapidly now.

"You folks who travel the main trails don't see much of what is going on in the mountains—the real life of the mountains," he said. "You have no conception of the real dangers which these hills contain. Yes, sir, they're hidden from the public eye, and only get to be known outside by reason of the chance experience of the traveller who happens to lose his way, but is lucky enough to escape the pitfalls with which he finds himself surrounded. I could tell you some queer yarns of these hills."

"Travellers' tales," suggested Grey, with a yawn and a disparaging smile. "I have heard some."

"Yes," said Robb, "there are queer tales afloat of adventures encountered by travellers journeying from the valley to the coast. But they're chiefly confined to wayside robbery, and are of a very sordid, everyday kind. No doubt your experiences are less matter-of-fact and more romantic. By Jove, I feel jolly comfy. Not much like turning out."

"That's how it takes me," said Smith quietly, but with a quick glance at the speaker. "But idleness won't boil my pot. It's a remarkable thing that I've felt wonderfully energetic these last few days, and now that I have to turn out I should prefer to stop where I am. I s'pose it's human nature."

He gazed upon his audience with a broad smile.

At that moment the loud yelping of the dogs penetrated the thick sides of the dugout. Rainy-Moon was preparing for the start. Doubtless the brilliant change in the weather had inspired the savage burden-bearers of the north.

"That's curious-smelling stuff, you're smoking," said

Grey, rousing himself with an effort after a moment's dead silence. "What do you call it?"

"Can't say—a weed," said Zachary Smith, glancing down his nose towards the bowl of his pipe. "Not bad, is it? Smells of almonds—tastes like nutty sherry."

Grey stifled a yawn.

"I feel sleepy, d——d sleepy. Wonder if Rainy-Moon has got the sleigh loaded."

Smith emitted another dense cloud of smoke from between his pursed lips; he seemed wrapt in the luxurious enjoyment of his smoke. Robb Chillingwood's eyelids were drooping, and his pipe had gone out. Quite suddenly the trapper's eyes were turned on the face of Grey, and the smoke from his pipe was chiefly directed towards him.

"There's time enough yet," he said quietly. "Half-an-hour more or less won't make much difference to you on the road. You were talking of travellers' tales, and I reckon you were thinking of fairy yarns that some folks think it smart to spin. Well, maybe those same stories have some foundation in fact, and ain't all works of imagination. Anyhow, my experience has taught me never to disbelieve until I've some good sound grounds for doing so."

He paused and gazed with a far-off look at the opposite wall. Then a shadowy smile stole over his face, and he went on. His companions' heads had drooped slowly forward, and their eyes were heavy with sleep. Grey was fighting against the drowsiness by jerking his head sharply upwards, but his eyes would close in spite of his efforts.

"Well, I never thought that I'd get caught napping," continued Smith, with a chuckle. "I thought I knew these regions well enough, but I didn't. I lost my way, too, and came near to losing my life——"

He broke off abruptly as Robb Chillingwood slowly rolled over on his side and began to snore loudly. Then Smith turned back to Leslie Grey, and leaning forward, so that his face was close to that of the officer, blew clouds of the pungent smoke right across the half-stupefied man's mouth and nostrils.

"I lost other things," he then went on meditatively, "but not my life. I lost that which was more precious

to me. I lost gold—gold! I lost the result of many weary months of toil. I had hoarded it up that I might go down to the east and buy a nice little ranch, and settle down into a comfortable, respectable man of property. I didn't even wait until the spring opened so that I could take the river route. No, that wasn't my way, because I knew it would cost a lot of money and I wasn't overburdened with wealth. I had just enough——"

He puffed vigorously at his pipe. Grey's head was now hanging forward and his chin rested on his chest.

There came the sound of Rainy-Moon's voice adjuring the dogs outside the door of the dugout. The trapper's eyes flashed evilly in the direction of the unconscious Indian.

"——to do what I wanted," he resumed. "No more —no less; and I set out on foot." He was anxiously watching for Grey's collapse. "Yes, I was going to tramp to the sea-coast through these mountains. I hit the wrong trail, decoyed by a false track carefully made by those who waited for me in these hills."—Grey was swaying heavily and his breathing was stertorous.—"I met my fate and was robbed of my gold. I was drugged —as you poor fools are being drugged now. When it was too late I discovered how it was done, and determined to do the same thing by the first victim that fell into my clutches. I tried the weed and soon got used to its fumes. Then I waited—waited. I had set my decoy at the cross-roads, and you—you—came."

As the trapper ceased speaking Grey slowly rolled over, insensible.

In a moment the watching man was upon his feet. His whole face was transfigured. Alertness was in every movement, in every flash of his great eyes. He moved quickly across the floor of the hut and took two shallow pannikins from the sack which lay upon the floor, dropped some of the flaky weed into the bottom of each one, and then from the stove he scraped some coals of fire into them. The fire set the dry weed smouldering, and the thick smoke rose heavily from the two tins. These he placed upon the ground in such a position that his hard-breathing victims should thoroughly inhale the fumes. Thus he would make doubly sure of them.

This done he stood erect and gazed for some seconds at the result of his handiwork; he was satisfied, but there was no look of pleasure on his face. He did not look like a man of naturally criminal instincts. There was nothing savage about his expression, or even callous. His look merely seemed to say that he had set himself this task, and, so far, what he had done was satisfactory in view of his object. He turned from the heavy-slumbering men and his eyes fell upon the two small gold chests. Instantly his whole expression changed. Here was the keynote to the man's disposition. Gold! It was the gold he coveted. At all costs that gold was to be his. His eyes shone with greed. He moved towards the boxes as though he were about to handle them; but he paused abruptly before he reached them. The barking of the dogs and the strident tones of the Indian's voice outside arrested him. He suddenly remembered that he had not yet completed his work.

Now he moved with unnecessarily stealthy steps over to the darkest corner of the hut, to where a pile of rough skins stood. The steady nerve which had hitherto served him seemed in a measure to have weakened. It was a phase which a man of his disposition must inevitably pass through in the perpetration of a first crime. He was assailed by a sensation of watching eyes following his every movement; with a feeling that another presence than those two slumbering forms moved with him in the dim light of the dugout. He was haunted by his other self; the moral self.

From beneath the pile of furs he drew a heavy revolver which he carefully examined. The chambers were loaded.

Again came the sound of the dogs outside. And he even fancied he heard the shuffling of Rainy-Moon's moccasins over the beaten snow just outside the door. He turned his face in the direction. The expression of his great hungry eyes was malevolent. Whatever moral fear might have been his, there could be no doubt that he would carry his purpose out. He gripped his pistol firmly and moved towards the door.

As his hand rested on the latch he paused. Just for one instant he hesitated. It seemed as though all that was honest in him was making one final appeal to the

evil passions which swayed him. His eyelids lowered suddenly, as though he could not even face the dim light of that gloomy interior. It was the attitude of one who fully realizes the nature of his actions, of one who shrinks from the light of honest purpose and prefers the obscure recesses of his own moral darkness. Then with an effort he pulled himself together; he gripped his nerve. The next moment he flung wide the door.

A flood of wintry sunshine suffused the interior of the dugout. The glare of the crystal white earth was dazzling to a degree, and the hungry-looking trapper stood blinking in the light. His pistol was concealed behind him. The sleigh was before the door. Rainy-Moon stood on the far side of the path in the act of hitching the dogs up. One of the animals, the largest of them all, was already harnessed, the others were standing or squatting around, held in leash by the Indian.

When he heard the door open Rainy-Moon looked up from his work. He was standing with his back to the precipice which bordered the narrow ledge. His great stolid face expressed nothing but solemn gravity. He grunted and turned again to his work.

Like a flash the trapper's pistol darted from behind him, and its report rang out echoing and re-echoing amongst the surrounding hills. There was an answering cry of pain from the harnessed dog, and Rainy-Moon with a yell stood erect to find himself gazing into the muzzle of the revolver. The expression of the trapper's face was relentless now. His first shot had been fired under the influence of excitement, and he had missed his object and only wounded the dog. Now it was different.

Again the pistol rang out. Rainy-Moon gave one sharp cry of pain and sprang backwards—into space. In one hand he still gripped the leashes of the dogs. The other clutched wildly at the air. For one instant his fall was broken by his hold upon the four dogs, then the suddenness of his precipitation and his weight told, and the poor beasts were dragged over the side of the chasm after him.

The whole dastardly act was but the work of a moment. The next all was silent save for the yelping of the wounded dog lying upon the snow.

The trapper stood for a moment framed in the doorway. The horror of his crime was upon him. He waited for a sound to come up to him from below. He longed to, but he dared not, look over the side of the yawning chasm. He feared what awful sight his eyes might encounter. His imagination conjured up pictures that turned him sick in the stomach, and a great dread came over him. Suddenly he turned back into the hut and slammed the door.

The wounded dog had not changed its attitude. The moments sped by. Suddenly the poor beast began to struggle violently. It was a huge specimen of the husky breed, exceptionally powerful and wolfish in its appearance. The wretched brute moaned incessantly, but its pain only made it struggle the harder to free itself from its harness. At length it succeeded in wriggling out of the primitive "breast-draw" which held it. Then the suffering beast limped painfully away down the path. Fifty yards from the hut it squatted upon its haunches and began to lick its wounded foot. And every now and then it would cease its healing operation to throw up its long muzzle and emit one of those drawn-out howls, so dismal and dispiriting, in which dogs are able to express their melancholy feelings.

At length the hut door opened again and the trapper came out; he was equipped for a long journey. Thick blanket chaps covered his legs, and a great fur coat reached to his knees. His head was buried beneath a beaver cap, which, pressed low down over his ears, was overlapped by the collar of his coat. He carried a roll of blankets over his shoulder and a pack on his back. As he came out into the sunshine he looked fearfully about him. There stood the loaded sleigh quite undisturbed. The harness alone was tumbled about by reason of the wounded dog's struggles. And there was a pool of canine blood upon the snow, and a faint trail of sanguinary hue leading from it. The man eyed this and followed its direction until he saw the dog crouching down further along the path. But he was not thinking of the dog. He turned back to the sleigh, and his eyes wandered across, beyond it, to the brink of the precipice. The only marks that had disturbed the smooth white

edge of the path were those which had tumbled the snow where the dogs had been dragged to their fate. Otherwise there was no sign.

The man stepped forward as though to look down to the depths below, but, as he neared the edge, he halted shudderingly. Nor did his eyes turn downwards, he looked around him, above him—but not down. He gazed long and earnestly at the hard, cold, cloudless sky. His brow frowned with unpleasant thought. Then his lips moved, and he muttered words that sounded as though he were endeavouring to justify his acts to himself.

"The gold was mine—honestly mine. It was wrested from me. It may be Christian to submit without retaliation. It is not human. What is a neche's life—nothing. Pooh! An Indian life is of no value in this country. Come on, let's go."

He spoke as though he were not alone. Perhaps he was addressing that moral self of his which kept reminding him of his misdeeds. Anyhow, he was uncomfortable, and his words told of it.

He stooped and adjusted his snow-shoes, after which he gripped his long staff and slowly began his journey down the hill.

He quickly got into his stride, that forward, leaning attitude of the snow-shoer; nor did he glance to the left or right.

Straight ahead of him he stared, over the jagged rampart of mountains to the clear steely hue of the sky above. He was leaving the scene of his crime; he wished also to leave its memory. He gave no heed to the trail of blood that stained the whiteness of the snow beneath his feet; his thoughts were not of the present—his present; his mind was travelling swiftly beyond. The whining of the dog as he passed him fell upon ears that were deaf to all entreaty.

The crystal-covered earth glided by him; the long, reaching stride of the expert snow-shoer bore him rapidly along.

He paused in the valley below and took fresh bearings. He intended to stride through the heart of the mountains. The Pass was his goal, for he knew that there lay the main trail he sought.

He cast about for the landmarks which he had located during his long tenancy of the dugout. Not a branch of a tree rustled. Not a breath of air fanned the steaming breath which poured from his lips. His mind was centred on his object, but the nervous realization of loneliness was upon him.

Suddenly the awful stillness was broken. The man bent his head in a listening attitude. The sound came from behind and he turned sharply. His movement was hurried and anxious. His nerves were not steady. A long-drawn-out wail rose upon the air. Fifty yards behind stood the wounded hound gazing after him as if he, too, were endeavouring to ascertain the right direction. The creature was standing upon three legs, the fourth was hanging useless, and the blood was dripping from the footless limb.

The man turned away with an impatient shrug and stepped out briskly. He knew his direction now, and resolutely centred his thoughts upon his journey. Past experience told him that this would tax all his energy and endurance, and that he must keep a clear head, for he was not a native of the country, nor had the instinct of one whose life had been passed in a mountainous world. Once he turned at the sound of a plaintive whining, and, to his annoyance, he saw that the dog was following him. A half-nervous laugh escaped him, but he did not pause. He had hitherto forgotten the creature, and this was an unpleasant reminder.

An hour passed. The exhilarating exercise had cleansed the atmosphere of the murderer's thoughts. Once only he looked back over his shoulder as some memory of the dog flashed across his brain. He could see nothing but the immaculate gleam of snow. Something of the purity of his surroundings seemed to communicate itself to his thoughts. He found himself looking forward to a life, the honest, respectable life, which the burden he carried in his pack would purchase for him. He saw himself the owner of vast tracts of pasture, with stock grazing upon it, a small but comfortable house, and a wife. He pictured to himself the joys of a pastoral life, a community in which his opinions and influence would be matters of importance. He would be looked up to,

and gradually, as his wealth grew, he would become interested in the world of politics, and he would——

He was dragged back to the present by a memory of the scene at the dugout, and quite suddenly he broke into a cold perspiration. He increased his pace, nor did those pleasant visions again return to him. It was well past noon when at last he halted for food and rest.

He devoured his simple fare ravenously, but he gained no enjoyment therefrom. He was moody. At that moment he hated life; he hated himself for his weak yielding to the pricks of conscience; he hated the snow and ice about him for their deadening effect upon the world through which he was passing; he hated the dreadful solitude with which he was surrounded.

Presently he drew out a pipe. He looked at it for one instant, then raised it to his nose. He smelt it, and, with a motion of disgust and a bitter curse, he threw it from him. It reeked of the weed he had found at the dugout.

Now he was seized with a feverish restlessness, and was about to rise to his feet. Suddenly, out on the still, biting air wailed the familiar long-drawn note of misery. To his disturbed fancy it came like a dreadful signal of some awful doom. It echoed in undulating waves of sound, dying away hardly, as though it were loth to leave its mournful surroundings. He turned in the direction whence it proceeded, and slowly into view limped the wounded husky, yelping piteously at every step.

At that moment the man was scarcely responsible for what he did. He was beside himself with dread. The solitude was on his nerves, this haunting dog, his own reflections, all had combined to reduce him to the verge of nervous prostration. With the last dying sound his heavy revolver was levelled in the direction of the oncoming hound. There was a moment's pause, then a shot rang out and the dog stood quite still. The bullet fell short and only kicked up the snow some yards in front of the animal, nor did the beast display the least sign of fear. The man prepared to take another shot, but, as he was about to fire, his arm dropped to his side, and, with a mirthless laugh, he put the pistol away.

"The d——d cur seems to know the range of a gun," he muttered, with an uneasy look at the motionless

creature. His words were an apology to himself, although perhaps he would not have admitted it.

The dog remained in its rigid attitude. Its head was slightly lowered, and its wicked grey eyes glared ferociously. Its thick mane bristled, and it looked like a gaunt, hungry wolf following upon the trail of some unconscious traveller. So long as the man stood, so long did the dog remain still and silent. But as the former returned to his seat, and began to pack up, the dog began to whine and furtively draw nearer.

Although he did not look up the man knew that the animal was coming towards him. When he had finished packing he straightened himself; the dog was within a few paces of him. He called gently, and the animal responded with a whimper, but remained where it was. Its canine mind was evidently dubious, and the man was forced to take the initiative. Whatever may have been his intention in the first place, he now exhibited a curious display of feeling for one who could plan and perpetrate so dastardly a crime as that which he had committed at the dugout. Human nature is a strange blending of good and evil passions. Two minutes ago the man would, without the least remorse, have shot the dog. Now as he reached him, and he listened to the beast's plaintive cries, he stretched out his arm and stroked its trembling sides, and then stooped to examine the wounded limb. And, stranger still, he tore off a portion of the woollen scarf that circled his waist and proceeded to bandage up the shattered member. The dog submitted to the operation with languid resignation. The foot of one hind leg had been entirely torn away by a revolver shot, and only the stump of the leg was left. The poor beast would go on three legs for the rest of his life.

When the man had finished he rose to his feet, and a bitter laugh shocked the silence of the snow-bound world.

"There, you miserable cur. It's better like that than to get the cold into it. I've had some; besides, I didn't intend to damage you. If you're going to travel with me you'd best come along, and be d——d to you."

And he walked back to where his pack and blankets lay, and the dog limped at his heels.

CHAPTER IV

'YELLOW BOOMING—SLUMP IN GREY'

THE days are long since gone when the name of the midland territory of the great Canadian world, Manitoba, suggested to the uninitiated nothing but Red Indians, buffalo and desperadoes of every sort and condition. Now-a-days it is well known, even in remote parts of the world, as one of the earth's greatest granaries; a land of rolling pastures, golden cornfields and prosperous, simple farm folk. In a short space of time, little more than a quarter of a century, this section of the country has been elevated from the profound obscurity of a lawless wilderness to one of the most thriving provinces of a great dominion. The old Fort Garry, one of the oldest factories of the Hudson's Bay Company, has given place to the magnificent city of Winnipeg, with its own University, its own governing assembly, its own clubs, hotels, its own world-wide commercial interests, besides being the great centre of railway traffic in the country. All these things, and many other indications of splendid prosperity too numerous to mention, have grown up in a little over twenty-five years. And with this growth the buffalo has gone, the red-man has been herded on to a limited reservation, and the "Bad-man" is almost an unknown quantity. Such is the Manitoba of to-day.

But during the stages of Manitoba's transition its history is interesting. The fight between law and lawlessness was long and arduous, the pitched battles many and frequent. Buffalo could be killed off quickly, the red-man was but a poor thing after the collapse of the Riel rebellion, but the "Bad-man" died hard.

This is the period in the history of Manitoba which

at present interests us. When Winnipeg was building with a rapidity almost rivalling that of the second Chicago, and the army of older farmers in the land was being hastily augmented by recruits from the mother country. When the military police had withdrawn their forces to the North-West Territories, leaving only detachments to hold the American border against the desperadoes which both countries were equally anxious to be rid of.

In the remote south-eastern corner of the province, forty-five miles from the nearest town—which happened to be the village of Ainsley—dumped down on the crest of a far-reaching ocean-like swell of rolling prairie, bare to the blast of the four winds except for the insignificant shelter of a small bluff on its north-eastern side, stood a large farm-house surrounded by a small village of barns and outbuildings. It was a typical Canadian farm of the older, western type. One of those places which have grown by degrees from the one central hut of logs, clay and thatch to the more pretentious proportions of the modern frame building of red pine weather-boarding, with shingled roofing to match, and the whole coloured with paint of a deep, port-wine hue, the points and angles being picked out with a dazzling white. It was a farm, let there be no mistake, and not merely a homestead.

There were abundant signs of prosperity in the trim, well-groomed appearance of the place. The unmistakable hall-mark was to be found in the presence of a steam-thresher, buried beneath a covering of tarpaulin and snow, in the array of farming machinery, and in the maze of pastures enclosed by top-railed, barbed-wire fencing. All these things, and the extent of the buildings. told of years of ceaseless industry and thrift, of able management and a proper pride in the vocation of its owner.

Nor were these outward signs in any way misleading. Silas Malling in his lifetime had been one of those sound-minded men, unimaginative and practical, the dominant note of whose creed had always been to do his duty in that state of life in which he found himself. The son of an early pioneer he had been born to the life of a farmer, and, having the good fortune to follow in the footsteps

of a thrifty father, he had lived long enough to see his farm grow to an extent many times larger and more prosperous than that of any neighbour within a radius of a hundred miles. But at the time of our story he had been gathered to his forefathers for nearly three years, and his worthy spouse, Hephzibah Malling, reigned in his stead. She ruled with an equally practical hand, and fortune had continued to smile upon her. Her bank balance had grown by leaps and bounds, and she was known to be one of the richest women in Southern Manitoba, and her only daughter, Prudence, to be heiress to no inconsiderable fortune. There was a son in the family, but he had eschewed the farm life, and passing out of the home circle, as some sort will, had gone into the world to seek his own way—his own experiences of life.

In spite of the wealth of the owners of Loon Dyke Farm they were very simple, unpretentious folk. They lived the life they had always known, abiding by the customs of childhood and the country to which they belonged with the whole-hearted regard which is now becoming so regrettably rare. Their world was a wholesome one which provided them with all they needed for thought, labour and recreation. To journey to Winnipeg, a distance of a hundred and twenty-six miles, was an event which required two days' preparation and as many weeks of consideration. Ainsley, one of those little border villages which dot the international boundary dividing Canada from the United States, was a place rarely visited by them, and when undertaken the trip was regarded as a notable jaunt.

Just now Mrs. Malling was a prey to the wildest excitement. An event was about to happen which disturbed her to a degree. It is doubtful as to what feeling was uppermost in her motherly bosom. She was torn between many conflicting emotions—joy, grief, pleasurable excitement. Her daughter, her only child, as she was wont to confide to her matronly friends—for her boy, whom she loved as only a mother can love a son, she believed she would never see again—was about to be married.

No visit to town, not even a sea voyage across the ocean, could possibly compare with this. It was a more significant event in her life even than when she went into

Winnipeg to choose the monument which was to be erected over the grave of her departed Silas. That she had always had in her mind's eye, not because she looked forward to his demise, but because she hoped some day to share with him its sheltering canopy. But somehow this forthcoming marriage of her daughter was in the nature of a shock to her. She was not mercenary, far from it, she was above any such motive as that, but she had hoped, when the time came for such matters to be considered, that Prudence would have married a certain rancher who lived out by the Lake of the Woods, a man of great wealth, and a man whom Mrs. Malling considered desirable in every way. Instead of that Prudence had chosen for herself amongst her many suitors, and worst of all she had chosen an insignificant official in the Customs department. That to Hephzibah Malling was the worst blow of all. With proper motherly pride she had hoped that " her girl " would have married a " some one " in her own world.

The winter evening shadows—it was the middle of January and winter still held sway upon the prairie—were falling, and the parlour at the farm was enveloped in a grey dusk. The room was large, low-ceiled, and of irregular shape.

It was furnished to serve many purposes, principally with a view to solid comfort. There was no blatant display of wealth, and every article of furniture bore signs of long though careful use. The spotless boarded floor was bare of carpet, but was strewn with rough-cured skins, timber-wolf, antelope, coyote and bear, and here and there rugs of undoubted home make; these latter of the patchwork order. The centre table was of wide proportions and of solid mahogany, and told of the many services of the apartment; the small chairs were old-fashioned mahogany pieces with horsehair seats, while the easy-chairs—and there were several of these—were capacious and of divers descriptions. A well-worn sofa was stowed away in an obscure angle, and a piano with a rose-silk front and fretwork occupied another of the many dark corners which the room possessed.

The whole atmosphere of the place was of extreme comfort. The bare description of furniture conveys

nothing, but the comfort was there and showed out in the odds and ends of family possessions which were in evidence everywhere—the grandfather's clock, the sewing-machine, the quaint old oil-lamps upon the mantel-board over the place where the fire should have been but was not; the soft hangings and curious old family pictures and discoloured engravings; the perfect femininity of the room. In all respects it was a Canadian farm "best parlour."

There were four occupants of the room. Two old ladies, rotund, and garbed in modest raiment of some sort of dark, clinging material, were gathered about the monster self-feeding stove, seated in arm-chairs in keeping with their ample proportions. One was the widow of the late Silas Malling, and the other was the school-ma'am from the Leonville school-house. This good lady rejoiced in the name of Gurridge, and Mrs. Gurridge was the oldest friend of Hephzibah Malling, a fact which spoke highly for the former good dame's many excellent qualities. Hephzibah was not a woman to set her affections on her sex without good reason. Her moral standard was high, and though she was ever ready to show kindliness to her fellow-creatures, she was far too practical and honest herself to take to her motherly bosom any one who was not worthy of regard.

As was natural, they were talking of the forthcoming marriage, and the tone of their lowered voices indicated that their remarks were in the nature of confidences. Mrs. Malling was sitting bolt upright, and her plump, rather rough hands were folded in her broad lap. Mrs. Gurridge was leaning towards the stove, gazing into the fire through the mica sides of the fire-box.

"I trust they will be happy," said Mrs. Gurridge, with a sigh. Then as an after-thought: "He seems all right."

"Yes," Mrs. Malling said, with a responsive exhalation, "I think so. He has few faults. But he is not the man to follow my Silas on this farm. I truly believe, Sarah, that he couldn't tell the difference between a cabbage-field and a potato-patch. These what-d'you-call-'ems, Civil servants, are only fit to tot up figures and play around with a woman's wardrobe every time she crosses the border. Thank goodness I'm not of the travelling

kind; I'm sure I should hide my face for very shame every time I saw a Customs officer."

The round, rosy face of the farm-wife assumed a deeper hue, and her still comely lips were pursed into an indignant *moue*. Her smooth grey head, adorned by a black lace cap trimmed with pearl beads, was turned in the direction of the two other occupants of the room, who were more or less buried in the obscurity of a distant corner.

For a moment she gazed at the dimly-outlined figure of a man who was seated on one of the horse-hair chairs, leaning towards the sofa on which reclined the form of her daughter, Prudence. His elbows were resting on his knees and his chin was supported upon his two clenched fists. He was talking earnestly. Mrs. Malling watched him for some moments, then her eyes drifted to the girl, the object of her solicitude.

Although the latter was in the shadow her features were, even at this distance, plainly discernible. There was a strong resemblance between mother and daughter. They were both of medium dark complexion, with strong colouring. Both were possessed of delightfully sweet brown eyes, and mouths and chins firm but shapely. The one remarkable difference between them was in the nasal organ. While the mother's was short, well-rounded, and what one would call pretty though ordinary, the girl's was prominent and aquiline with a decided bridge. This feature gave the younger woman a remarkable amount of character to her face. Altogether hers was a face which, wherever she went, would inevitably attract admiring attention. Just now she was evidently teasing the man before her, and the mother turned back to the stove with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

"I think Prudence will teach him a few lessons," she murmured to her friend.

"What—about the farm?"

"Well, I wasn't just thinking of the farm."

The two ladies smiled into each other's faces.

"She is a good child," observed Mrs. Gurridge affectionately, after awhile.

"Or she wouldn't be her father's child."

"Or your daughter, Hephzibah," said Sarah Gurridge sincerely.

The two relapsed into silence. The glowing coals in the stove shook lower and received augmentation from the supply above. Darkness was drawing on.

Prudence was holding the *Free Press* out towards the dying light and the man was protesting. The latter is already known to us. His name was Leslie Grey, now an under-official of the Customs department at the border village of Ainsley.

"Don't strain your eyes in this light, dear," he was saying. "Besides, I want to talk to you." He laid his hand upon the paper to take it from her. But the girl quickly withdrew it out of his reach.

"You must let me look at the personal column, Leslie," she said teasingly. "I just love it. What do you call it? The 'Agony' column, isn't it?"

"Yes," the man answered, with some show of irritation. "But I want——"

"Of course you do," the girl interrupted. "You want to talk to me—very right and proper. But listen to this."

Grey bit his lip. Prudence bent her face close to the paper and read in a solemn whisper—

"'Yellow booming—slump in Grey'! Now I wonder what that means? Do you think it's a disguised love message to some forlorn damsel in the east, or does it conceal the heartrending cry of a lost soul to some fond but angry parent?" Then, as the man did not immediately answer, she went on with a pucker of thought upon her brow. "'Yellow'—that might mean gold. 'Booming'—ah, yes, the Kootenai mines, or the Yukon. There is going to be a rush there this year, isn't there? Oh, I forgot," with a real contrition, "I mustn't mention the Yukon, must I? That is where your disaster occurred that caused you to be banished to the one-horsed station of Ainsley."

"Not forgetting the reduction of my salary to the princely sum of two thousand dollars per annum," Grey added bitterly.

"Never mind, old boy, it brought us together, and dollars aren't likely to trouble us any. But let me get on with my puzzle. 'Slump in Grey.' That's funny, isn't it? 'Slump' certainly has to do with business.

I've seen 'Slump' in the finance columns of the Toronto *Globe*. And then 'Grey.' That's your name."

"I believe so."

"Um. Guess I can't make much of it. Seems to me it must be some business message. I call it real disappointing."

"Perhaps not so disappointing as you think, sweetheart," Grey said thoughtfully.

"What, do you understand it?" The girl at once became all interest.

"Yes," slowly, "I understand it, but I don't know that I ought to tell you."

"Of course you must. I'm just dying of curiosity. Besides," she went on coaxingly, "we are going to be married, and it wouldn't be right to have any secrets from me. Dear old Gurridge never lost an opportunity of firing sage maxims at us when I used to go to her school. I think the one to suit this occasion ran something like this—

> 'Secrets withheld 'twixt man and wife
> Infallibly end in connubial strife.'

She always made her rhymes up as she went along. She's a sweet old dear, but so funny."

But Grey was not heeding the girl's chatter. His face was serious and his obstinate mouth was tight-shut. He was gazing with introspective eyes at the paper which was now lying in the girl's lap. Suddenly he leaned further forward and spoke almost in a whisper.

"Look here, Prue, I want you to listen seriously to what I have to say. I'm not a man given to undue hopefulness. I generally take my own way in things and see it through, whether that way is right or wrong. So far I've had some successes and more failures. If I were given to dreaming or repining I should say Fate was dead against me. That last smasher I came in the mountains, when I lost the Government bullion, nearly settled me altogether, but, in spite of it all, I haven't given up hope yet, and what is more, I anticipate making a big coup shortly which will reinstate me in favour with the heads of my department. My coup is in connection

with the notice you have just read out from the ' Agony ' column."

The girl nodded. She was quite serious now. Grey paused, and the ticking of the grandfather's clock on the other side of the room pounded heavily in the twilight. The murmur of the old ladies' voices occasionally reached the lovers, but it did not interrupt them or divert their attention from their own affairs.

" That notice," Grey went on, " has appeared at regular intervals in the paper, and is a message to certain agents from a certain man, to say that certain illicit work has been carried out. I have discovered who this man is and the nature of his work. It does not matter who he is or what the work; in fact, it would be dangerous to mention either, even here; the point is that I have discovered the secret, and I, alone, am going to benefit by my discovery. I am not going to let any one share the reward with me. I want to reinstate myself with the authorities, and so regain my lost position, then no one will be able to say things about my marriage with you."

" No one had better say anything against you in my hearing, anyway, Leslie," the girl put in quickly. " Because I happen to be rich—or shall be—is nothing to do with any one but myself. As far as I can see it will be a blessing. Go on."

" No doubt it is as you say, dear," the man pursued; " but there are plenty of people unkind enough to believe that I am marrying you for your money. However, I am going to get this man red-handed, and, I tell you, it will be the greatest coup of my life."

" I hope you will succeed, Leslie," the girl said, her brown eyes fixed in admiration upon her lover. " Do you know, I never thought you were such a determined fellow," she added impulsively. " Why, I can almost believe that you'd learn to farm if you took the notion."

Grey's sense of humour was not equal to the occasion, and he took her remark quite seriously.

" A man must be a fool if he can't run a farm," he said roughly.

" Many folks labour under that mistake," the girl replied. Then: " Say, when are you going to do this thing ? "

"Strangely enough, the critical moment will come two days after our marriage. Let's see. This is Monday. We are to be married to-morrow week. That will make it Thursday week."

The girl sat herself up on the sofa, and her young face expressed dismay.

"Right in the middle of our honeymoon. Oh, Leslie!"

"It can't be helped, dearest. I shall only be away from you for that afternoon and the night. Think of what it means to me. Everything."

"Ah, yes." She sank back again upon the sofa. There was the faintest glimmer of a smile in the depths of her dark eyes. "I forgot what it meant to you."

The unconscious irony of her words fell upon stony ground.

Prudence Malling was deeply in love with Leslie Grey. How few men fully appreciate the priceless treasure of a good woman's regard.

"If I bring this off it means immediate promotion," Grey went on, in his blindly selfish way. "I must succeed. I hate failure."

"They will take you off the border, then," said the girl musingly. "That will mean—leaving here."

"Which also means a big step up."

"Of course—it will mean a big step up."

The girl sighed. She loved the farm; that home which she had always known. She changed the subject suddenly.

"It must be nearly tea-time. We are going to have tea early, Leslie, so that we can get through with it comfortably before the people come."

"Oh yes, I forgot you are having a 'Progressive Euchre' party to-night. What time does it begin? I mean the party."

"Seven o'clock. But you are going to stay to tea?"

Grey glanced up at the yellow face of the grandfather's clock and shook his head.

"Afraid not, little girl. I've got some work to do in connection with Thursday week. I will drop in about nine o'clock. Who're coming?"

"Is it really necessary, this work?" There was a touch of bitterness in Prudence's voice. But the next

moment she went on cheerfully. She would not allow herself to stand in her lover's way. "The usual people are coming. It will be just our monthly gathering of neighbouring—mossbacks," with a laugh. "The Turners, the Furrers—Peter Furrers, of course; he still hopes to cut you out—and the girls; old Gleichen and his two sons, Harry and Tim. And the Ganthorns from Rosebank and their cousins the Covills of Lakeville. And—I almost forgot him—mother's flame, George Iredale of Lonely Ranch."

"Is Iredale coming? It's too bad of you to have him here, Prue. Your mother's flame—um, I like that. Why, he's been after you for over three years. It's not right to ask him when I am here, besides——" Grey broke off abruptly. Darkness hid the angry flush which had spread over his face. The girl knew he was angry. His tone was raised, and there was no mistaking Leslie Grey's anger. He was very nearly a gentleman, but not quite.

"I think I have a perfect right to ask him, Leslie," she answered seriously. "His coming can make no possible difference to you. Frankly, I like him, but that makes no difference to my love for you. Why, you dear, silly thing, if he asked me from now till Doomsday I wouldn't marry him. He's just a real good friend. But still, if it will please you, I don't mind admitting that mother insisted on his coming, and that I had nothing to do with it. That is why I call him mother's flame. Now, then, take that ugly frown off your face and say you're sorry."

Grey showed no sign of obedience; he was very angry. It was believed and put about by the busy-bodies of the district, that George Iredale had sought Prudence Malling in marriage ever since she had grown up. He was a bachelor of close upon forty. One of those quiet, determined men, slow of speech, even clumsy, but quick to make up their minds, and endowed with a great tenacity of purpose. A man who rarely said he was going to do a thing, but generally did it. These known features in a man who, up to the time of the announcement of Prudence's engagement to Grey, had been a frequent visitor to the farm, and who was also well known to be

wealthy and more than approved of by Mrs. Malling, no doubt gave a certain amount of colour to the belief of those who chose to pry into their neighbours' affairs.

"Anyway I don't think there is room for both Iredale and myself in the house," Grey went on heatedly. "If you didn't want him you should have put your foot down on your mother's suggestion. I don't think I shall come to-night."

For one moment the girl looked squarely into her lover's face and her pretty lips drew sharply together. Then she spoke quite coldly.

"You will—or I'll never speak to you again. You are very foolish to make such a fuss."

There was a long silence between the lovers. Then Grey drew out his watch, opened it, glanced at the time, and snapped it close again.

"I must go," he said shortly.

Prudence had risen from the sofa. She no longer seemed to heed her lover. She was looking across the darkened room at the homely picture round the glowing stove.

"Very well," she said. And she moved away from the man's side.

The two old ladies pausing in their conversation heard Grey's announcement and the answer Prudence made. Sarah Gurridge leaned towards her companion with a confidential movement of the head. The two grey heads came close together.

The school-ma'am whispered impressively—

> "'Maid who angers faithful swain
> Will shed more tears and know more pain
> Than she who loves and loves in vain.'"

Hephzibah laughed tolerantly. Sarah's earnestness never failed to amuse her.

"My dear," the girl's mother murmured back, when her comfortable laugh had gurgled itself out, "young folks must skit-skat and bicker, or where would be the making up? La, I'm sure when I was a girl I used to tweak my poor Silas's nose for the love of making him angry—Silas had a long nose, my dear, as you may remember. Men hate to be tweaked, especially on their

weak points. My Silas was always silly about his nose. And we never had less than half-an-hour's making up. I wonder how Prudence has tweaked Mr. Grey—I can't bring myself to call him Leslie, my dear."

Prudence had reached her mother's side. The two old heads parted with guilty suddenness.

"Oh, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Malling, "how you did startle me."

"I'm sorry, mother," the girl said, "but I wanted to tell you that Leslie is not coming to-night," Prudence turned a mischievous face towards her lover.

Mrs. Malling wrinkled up her smooth forehead. She assumed an air of surprise.

"Why not, my child?"

"Oh, because you have asked Mr. Iredale. Leslie says it isn't right."

Prudence was still looking in her lover's direction. He had his back turned. He was more angry than ever now.

"My dears," said her mother with an indulgent smile, "you are a pair of silly noodles. But Mr. Grey—I mean Leslie—must please himself. George Iredale is coming because I have asked him. This house is yours to come and go as you like—er—Leslie. George Iredale has promised to come to the cards to-night. Did I hear you say you were going now? I should have taken it homely if you would have stayed to tea. The party begins at seven, don't forget."

Three pairs of quizzical eyes were fixed upon Grey's good-looking but angry face. His anger was against Prudence entirely now. She had made him look foolish before these two ladies, and that was not easily to be forgiven. Grey's lack of humour made him view things in a ponderous light. He felt most uncomfortable under the laughing gaze of those three ladies.

However, he would not give way an inch.

"Yes, I must go now," he said ungraciously. "But not on account of George Iredale," he added blunderingly. "I have some important work to do——"

He was interrupted by a suppressed laugh from Prudence. He turned upon her suddenly, glared, then walked abruptly to the door.

"Good-bye," he exclaimed shortly, and the door closed sharply behind him.

"Why, Prudence," said Mrs. Malling, turning her round laughing face to her daughter and indicating the door. "Aren't you——"

"No, I'm not, mother dear," the girl answered with a forced laugh.

Sarah Gurridge patted her late pupil's shoulder affectionately. But her head shook gravely as though a weight of worldly wisdom was hers.

"I don't think he'll stay away," said the mother, with a tender glance in the girl's direction.

"He hasn't chin enough," said Sarah, who prided herself upon her understanding of physiognomy.

"Indeed he has," retorted Prudence, who heard the remark.

Mrs. Malling was right, Leslie Grey was not going to stay away. He had no intention of doing so. But his reasons were quite apart from those Hephzibah Malling attributed to him. He wished to see George Iredale, and because of the man's coming Grey would forego his angry desire to retaliate upon Prudence. He quite ignored what he was pleased to call his own pride in the matter. He would come because he had what he considered excellent reasons for so doing.

Prudence lit the lamps and laid the table for tea. Her mother ambled off to the great kitchen as fast as her bulk would allow her. There were many things in that wonderful place to see to for the supper, and on these occasions Mrs. Malling would not trust their supervision even to Prudence, much less to the hired girl, Mary. Sarah Gurridge remained in her seat by the stove watching the glowing coals dreamily, her mind galloping ahead through fanciful scenes of her own imagination. Had she been asked she would probably have stated that she was looking forward into the future of the pair who were so soon to be married.

Prudence went on quietly and nimbly with her work. Presently Sarah turned, and after a moment's intent gaze at the trim, rounded figure, said in her profoundest tone—

"'Harvest your wheat ere the August frost;
One breath of cold and the crop is lost.'"

"Oh, bother—there, I've set a place for Leslie," exclaimed Prudence in a tone of vexation. "What is that about 'frost' and 'lost'?"

"Nothing, dear, I was only thinking aloud." And Sarah Gurridge relapsed into silence, and continued to bask in the warm glow of the stove.

CHAPTER V

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL

GREY strode away from the house in no very amiable frame of mind. A fenced-in patch, planted with blue-gums and a mass of low-growing shrubs, formed a sort of garden in front of the farm.

This enclosure was devoid of all artistic effect, but in summer-time it served as a screen to break the rigour of the wooden farm-buildings. It was a practical but incongruous piece of man's handiwork, divided down the centre by a pathway bordered with overlapped hoopings of bent red willowy switches, which, even in winter, protruded hideously above the beaten snow. The path led to a front gate of primitive and bald manufacture, but stout and serviceable, as was everything else about the farm. And this was the main approach to the house.

It was necessary for Grey, having taken his departure by the front door, to pass out through this gate in order to reach the barn where he had left his saddle-horse. He might have saved himself this trouble by leaving the house by the back door, which opened out directly opposite the entrance to the great barn. But he was in no mood for back doors; the condition of his mind demanded nothing less than a dignified exit, and a dignified exit is never compatible with a back door. Had he left Loon Dyke Farm in an amiable frame of mind, much that was to happen in his immediate future might have been different.

But the writing had been set forth, and there was no altering it.

He walked with a great show of unnecessary energy. It was his nature to do so. His energy was almost painful to behold. Too much vigour and energy is

almost worse than chronic indolence; sooner or later people so afflicted find themselves in difficulties.

It was more than a year since his misadventure in the mountains. He had suffered for his own wrong-headedness over that matter, but he had not profited by his experience; he was incapable of doing so. His length of service and reputation for hard work had saved him from dismissal, but Chillingwood was less fortunate; subordinates in Government service generally are less fortunate when their superiors blunder.

However, Grey had outlived that unpleasantness. He was not the man to brood over disaster. Soon after he had been transferred to Ainsley the Town Clerkship fell vacant. He did what he could for Chillingwood, with the result that the younger man eventually secured the post, and thus found himself enjoying a bare existence on an income of $500 per annum.

Halfway down the path Grey became aware of a horseman approaching the farm. The figure was moving along slowly over the trail from Ainsley. In the dusk the horse appeared to be jaded; its head hung down, and its gait was ambling. The stranger was tall, but beyond that Grey could see nothing, for the face was almost entirely hidden in the depths of the storm-collar of his coat. The officer looked hard at the new-comer. It was part of his work to know, at least by sight, every inhabitant of his district. This man was quite a stranger to him. The horse was unknown to him, and the fur coat was unfamiliar. In winter these things usually mark a man out to his acquaintances. The horse shows up against the snow, and the prairie man does not usually possess two fur coats.

On the stranger's first appearance Grey's thoughts had at once flown to George Iredale, but now, as he realized that the man was unknown to him, his interest relaxed. However, he walked slowly on to the gate so that he might obtain a closer inspection. Horse and rider were about twenty-five yards off when Grey reached the gate, and he saw that they were followed at some distance by a great wolfish-looking hound.

The evening shadows had grown rapidly. The grey vault of snow-clouds above made the twilight much

darker than usual. Grey waited. The traveller silently drew up his horse, and for a moment sat gazing at the figure by the gate. All that was visible of his face was the suggestion of a nose and a pair of large dark eyes.

Grey opened the gate and passed out.

"Evening," said the horseman, in a voice muffled by the fur of his coat-collar.

"Good-evening," replied Grey shortly.

"Loon Dyke Farm," said the stranger, in a tone less of inquiry than of making a statement.

Grey nodded, and turned to move away. Then he seemed to hesitate, and turned again to the stranger. Those eyes! Where had he seen just such a pair of eyes before? He tried to think, but somehow his memory failed him. The horseman had turned his face towards the house, and so the great roving eyes were hidden. But Grey was too intent upon the business he had in hand to devote much thought to anything else.

There was no further reason for remaining; he had satisfied his curiosity. He would learn all about the stranger later on.

He hurried round to the stables. When he had gone the stranger dismounted; for a moment or two he stood with one hand on the gate and the other holding the horse's reins, gazing after the retreating form of the Customs officer. He waited until the other had disappeared, then leisurely hitched his horse's reins on to the fence of the enclosure, and, passing in through the gate, approached the house. Presently he saw Grey ride away, and a close observer might have detected the sound of a heavy sigh escaping from between the embracing folds of the fur collar as the man walked up the path and rapped loudly upon the front door with his mitted fist. The three-footed hound had closed up on his master, and now stood beside him.

Prudence opened the door. Tea was just ready; and she answered the summons, half expecting to find that her lover had thought better of his ill-humour and had returned to share the evening meal. She drew back well within the house when she realized her mistake. The stranger stood for one second as though in doubt; then his voice reached the waiting girl.

"Prudence, isn't it?"

The girl started. Then a smile broke over her pretty, dark face.

"Why it's Hervey—brother Hervey. Here, mother," she called back into the house. "Quick, here's Hervey. Why, you dear boy, I didn't expect you for at least a week—and then I wasn't sure you would come. You got my letter safely then, and you must have started off almost at once—you're a real good brother to come so soon. Yes, in here; tea is just ready. Take off your coat. Come along, mother," she called out again joyously. "Hurry; come as fast as you can; Hervey is here." And she ran away towards the kitchen. Her mother's movements were far too slow to suit her.

The man removed his coat, and voices reached him from the direction of the kitchen.

"Dearie me, but, child, you do rush one about so. Where is he? There, you've left the door open; and whose is that hideous brute of a dog? Why, it looks like a timber wolf. Send him out."

Mrs. Malling talked far more rapidly than she walked, or rather trotted, under the force of her daughter's bustling excitement. Hervey went out into the hall to meet her. Standing framed in the doorway he saw his dog.

"Get out, you brute," he shouted, and stepping quickly up to the animal he launched a cruel kick at it which caught it squarely on the chest. The beast turned solemnly away without a sound, and Hervey closed the door.

The mother was the first to meet him. Her stout arms were outstretched, while her face beamed with pride, and her eyes were filled with tears of joy.

"My dear, dear boy," she exclaimed, smiling happily. Hervey made no reciprocal movement. He merely bent his head down to her level and allowed her to kiss his cheek. She hugged him forcefully to her ample bosom, an embrace from which he quickly released himself. Her words then poured forth in a swift, incoherent flow. "And to think I believed that I should never see you again. And how you have grown and filled out. Just like your father. And where have you been all this time, and have you kept well? Look at the tan on his face, Prudence, and the beard too. Why, I should hardly

have known you, boy, if I hadn't 'a known who it was. Why, you must be inches taller than your father for sure —and he was a tall man. But you must tell me all about yourself when the folks are all gone to-night. We are having a party, you know. And isn't it nice ?—you will be here for Prudence's wedding——"

"Don't you think we'd better go into the parlour instead of standing out here ? " the girl interrupted practically. Her mother's rambling remarks had shown no sign of cessation, and the tea was waiting. "Hervey must be tired and hungry."

"Well, I must confess I am utterly worn out," the man replied with a laugh. "Yes, mother, if tea is ready let's come along. We can talk during the meal."

They passed into the parlour. As they seated themselves at the table, Sarah Gurridge joined them from her place beside the stove. Hervey had not noticed her presence when he first entered the room, and the good school-ma'am, quietly day-dreaming, had barely awakened to the fact of his coming. Now she, too, joined in the enthusiasm of the moment.

"Ah, Hervey," she said, with that complacent air of proprietorship which our early preceptors invariably assume, "you haven't forgotten me, I know.

> 'Though the tempest of life will oft shut out the past,
> The thoughts of our school-days remain to the last.'"

"Glad to see you, Mrs. Gurridge. No, I haven't forgotten you," the man replied.

A slight pause followed. The women-folk had so much to say that they hardly knew where to begin. That trifling hesitation might have been accounted for by this fact. Or it might have been that Hervey was less overjoyed at his home-coming than were his mother and sister.

Prudence was the first to speak.

"Funny that I should have set a place more than I intended at the tea-table," she said, "and funnier still that when I found out what I'd done I didn't remove the plate and things. And now you turn up." She laughed joyously.

Sarah Gurridge looked over in the girl's direction and shook an admonitory forefinger at her.

"Mr. Grey, my dear—you were thinking of Mr. Grey, in spite of your lover's tiff."

"Who did you say?" asked Hervey, with a quick glance at Prudence.

"Leslie Grey," said his mother, before the old schoolma'am could reply. "Didn't our Prudence tell you when she wrote? He's the man she's going to marry. I must say he's not the man I should have set on for her; but she's got her own ploughing to seed, and I'm not the one to say her 'nay' when she chooses her man."

Hervey busied himself with his food, nor did he look up when he spoke.

"That was Grey, I s'pose, I saw riding away as I came up? Good, square-set chunk of a man."

"Yes, he left just before you came," said Prudence. "But never mind about him, brother. Tell us about yourself. Have you made a fortune?"

"For sure, he must," said their mother, gazing with round, proud eyes upon her boy, "for how else came he to travel from California to here, just to set his eyes on us and see a slip of a girl take to herself a husband? My, but it's a great journey for a boy to take."

"Nothing to what I've done in my time," replied Hervey. "Besides, mother, I've got further to go yet. And as for sister Prudence's marriage, I'm afraid I can't stay for that."

"Not stay?" exclaimed his mother.

"Do you mean it?" asked his sister incredulously.

Sarah Gurridge contented herself with looking her dismay.

"You see, it's like this," said Hervey. He had an uncomfortable habit of keeping his eyes fixed upon the table, only just permitting himself occasional swift upward glances over the other folk's heads. "When I got your letter, Prudence, I was just preparing to come up from Los Mares to go and see a big fruit-grower at Niagara. The truth is that my fruit farm is a failure and I am trying to sell it."

"My poor boy!" exclaimed his mother; "and you never told me. But there, you were always as proud as proud, and never would let me help you. Your poor father was just the same, when things went wrong he

wouldn't own up to any one. I remember how we lost sixty acres of forty-bushel, No. 1 wheat with an August frost. I never learned it till we'd taken in the finest crop in the district at the next harvesting. But you didn't put all your savings into fruit ? "

" I'm afraid I did, mother, worse luck."

" All you made up at the Yukon goldfields ? " asked Prudence, alarm in her voice.

" Every cent."

There followed a dead silence.

" Then——" Mrs. Malling could get no further.

" I'm broke—dead broke. And I'm going East to sell my land to pay off my debts. I've had an offer for it, and I'm going to clinch the deal quick. Say, I just came along here to see you, and I'm going on at once. I only got into Winnipeg yesterday. I rode out without delay, but struck the Ainsley trail, or I should have been here sooner. Now, see here, mother," Hervey went on, as a woe-begone expression closely verging on tears came into the old dame's eyes, " it's no use crying over this business. What's done is done. I'm going to get clear of my farm first, and maybe afterwards I'll come here again and we'll talk things over a bit."

Prudence sat staring at her brother, but Hervey avoided her gaze. Mrs. Malling was too heartbroken to speak yet. Her weather-tanned face had blanched as much as it was possible for it to do. Her boy had gone out upon the world to seek his fortune, and he had succeeded in establishing himself, he had written and told her. He had found gold in quantities in the Yukon valley, and now—now, at last, he had failed. The shock had for the moment crushed her; her boy, her proud independent boy, as she had been wont to consider him, had failed. She did not ask herself, or him, the reason of his failure. Such failure, she felt, must be through no fault of his, but the result of adverse circumstances.

She never thought of the gambling-table. She never thought of reckless living. Such things could not enter her simple mind and be in any way associated with her boy. Hephzibah Malling loved her son; to her he was the king who could do no wrong. She continued to gaze blankly in the man's direction.

Sarah Gurridge alone of the trio allowed herself side-long, speculative glances at the man's face. She had seen the furtive overhead glances; the steady avoidance of the loving observation of his womankind. She had known Hervey as well, and perhaps just a shade better than his mother and sister had; and long since, in his childish school-days, she had detected a lurking weakness in an otherwise good character. She wondered now if he had lived to outgrow that juvenile trait, or had it grown with him, gaining strength as the greater passions of manhood developed?

After the first shock of Hervey's announcement had passed, Mrs. Malling sought refuge in the consolation of her own ability to help her son. He must never know want, or suffer the least privation. She could and would give him everything he needed. Besides, after all, she argued with womanly feeling, now perhaps she could persuade him to look after the farm for her; to stay by her side. He should be in no way dependent. She would install him as manager at a comfortable salary. The idea pleased her beyond measure, and it was with difficulty she could keep herself from at once putting her proposal into words. However, by a great effort, she checked her enthusiasm.

"Then when do you think of going East?" she asked, with some trepidation. "You won't go at once, sure."

"Yes, I must go at once," Hervey replied promptly. "That is, to-morrow morning."

"Then you will stay to-night," said Prudence.

"Yes; but only to get a good long sleep and rest my horse. I'm thoroughly worn out. I've been in saddle since early this morning."

"Have you sent your horse round to the barn?" asked Sarah Gurridge.

"Well, no. He's hitched to the fence." The observing Sarah had been sure of it.

Prudence rose from her seat and called out to the hired girl—

"Mary, send out and tell Andy to take the horse round to the barn. He's hitched to the fence." Then she came back. "You'll join our party to-night, of course."

"Hoity, girl, of course not," said their mother. "How's

the lad going to get rest gallivanting with a lot of clowns who can only talk of 'bowers' and 'jokers'? You think of nothing but 'how-de-doin'' with your neighbours since you're going to be married. Things were different in my day. I'll look after Hervey," she continued, turning to her son. "You shall have a good night, lad, or my name's not Hephzibah Malling. Maybe you'll tell me by and by what you'd like to do."

"That's right, mother," replied Hervey, with an air of relief. "You understand what it is for a man to need rest. I'll just hang around till the folks come, and then sneak off to bed. You don't mind, Prue, do you? I'm dead beat, and I want to leave at daybreak."

"Mind?" answered Prudence; "certainly not, Hervey. I should have liked you to meet Mr. Grey, but you must get your rest."

"Sure," added her mother, "and as for meeting Mr. Grey—well, your brother won't sicken for want of seeing him, I'll wager. Come along, Hervey, we'll go to the kitchen; Prudence has to get her best parlour ready for these chattering noodles. And, miss," turning to her daughter with an expression of pretended severity, "don't forget that I've got a batch o' layer cakes in the ice-box, and you've not told me what you want in the way of drinks. La, young folks never think of the comforts. I'm sure I don't know what you'll do without your mother, girl. Some o' these times your carelessness will get your parties made a laughing-stock of. Come along, Hervey."

The old lady bustled out, bearing her son off in triumph to the kitchen. She was quite happy again now. Her scheme for her son's welfare had shut out all thought of his bad news. Most women are like this; the joy of giving to their own is perhaps the greatest joy in the life of a mother.

In the hall they met the flying, agitated figure of the hired girl, Mary.

"Oh, please, 'm, there's such a racket going on by the barn. There's Andy an' the two dogs fighting with a great, strange, three-legged dog wot looks like a wolf. They're that mussed up that I don't know, I'm sure."

"It's that brute Neche of mine," said Hervey, with an imprecation. "It's all right, girl; I'll go."

Hervey rushed out to the barn. The great three-legged

savage was in the midst of a fierce scrimmage. Two farm dogs were attacking him. They were both half-bred sheep-dogs. One was making futile attempts to get a hold upon the stranger, and Neche was shaking the other as a terrier would shake a rat. And Andy, the choreman, was lambasting the intruder with the business end of a two-tine hay-fork, and shouting frightful curses at him in a strong American accent.

As Hervey came upon the scene, Neche hurled his victim from him, either dead or dying, for the dog lay quite still where it fell upon the snow. Then, impervious to the onslaught of the choreman, he seized the other dog.

"Come out of it, Andy," cried Hervey.

The hired man ceased his efforts at once, glad to be done with the savage. Hervey then ran up to the infuriated husky, and dealt him two or three terrible kicks.

The dog turned round instantly. His fangs were dripping with blood, and he snarled fiercely, his baleful eyes glowing with ferocity. But he slunk off when he recognized his assailant, allowing the second dog to run for its life, howling with canine fear.

Andy went over to the dog that was stretched upon the snow.

"Guess 'e's done, boss," he said, looking up at Hervey as the latter came over to his side. "Say, that's about the slickest scrapper round these parts. Gee-whizz, 'e went fur me like the tail end o' a cyclone when I took your plug to the barn. It was they curs that kind o' distracted his attention. Mebbe thar's more wolf nor dog in him. Mebbe, I sez."

"Yes, he's a devil-tempered husky," said Hervey. "I'll have to shoot him one of these days."

"Wa'al, I do 'lows that it's a mercy 'e ain't got no more'n three shanks. Mackinaw! but he's handy."

The four women had watched the scene from the kitchen door. Hervey came over to where they were standing.

"I'm sorry, mother," he said. "Neche has killed one of your dogs. He's a fiend for fighting. I've a good mind to shoot him now."

"No, don't go for to do that," said his mother. "We oughtn't to have sent Andy to take your horse. I expect the beast thought he was doing right."

"He's a brute. Curse him!"

Prudence said nothing. Now she moved a little away from the house and talked to the dog. He was placidly, and with no show of penitence, lying down and licking a laceration on one of his front legs. He occasionally shook his great head, and stained the snow with the blood which dripped from his fierce-looking ears. He paused in his operation at the sound of the girl's voice, and looked up. Her tone was gentle and caressing. Hervey suddenly called to her.

"Don't go near him. He's as treacherous as a dogone Indian."

"Come back," called out her mother.

The girl paid no attention. She called again, and patted her blue apron encouragingly. The animal rose slowly to his feet, looked dubiously in her direction, then, without any display of enthusiasm, came slowly towards her. His limp added to his wicked aspect, but he came, nor did he stop until his head was resting against her dress, and her hand was caressing his great back. The huge creature seemed to appreciate the girl's attitude, for he made no attempt to move away. It is probable that this was the first caress the dog had ever known in all his savage life.

Hervey looked on and scratched his beard thoughtfully, but he said nothing more. Mrs. Malling went back to the kitchen. Sarah Gurridge alone had anything to say.

"Poor creature," she observed, in tones of deep pity. "I wonder how he lost his foot. Is he always fighting? A poor companion, I should say."

Hervey laughed unpleasantly.

"Oh, he's not so bad. He's savage, and all that. But he's a good friend."

"Ah, and a deadly enemy. I suppose he's very fond of you. He lets you kick him," she added significantly.

"I hardly know—and I must say I don't much care—what his feelings are towards me. Yes, he lets me kick him." Then, after a pause, "But I think he really hates me."

And Hervey turned abruptly and went back into the kitchen. He preferred the more pleasant atmosphere of his mother's adulation to the serious reflections of Sarah Gurridge.

CHAPTER VI

THE PROGRESSIVE EUCHRE PARTY

THE Mallings always had a good gathering at their card parties. Such form of entertainment and dances were the chief winter amusement of these prairie-bred folks. A twenty-mile drive in a box-sleigh, clad in furs, buried beneath heavy fur robes, and reclining on a deep bedding of sweet-smelling hay, in lieu of seats, made the journey as comfortable to such people as would the more luxurious brougham to the wealthy citizen of civilization. There was little thought of display amongst the farmers of Manitoba. When they went to a party their primary object was enjoyment, and they generally contrived to obtain their desire at these gatherings. Journeys were chiefly taken in parties; and the amount of snugness obtained in the bottom of a box-sleigh would be surprising to those without such experience. There was nothing *blasé* about the simple country folk. A hard day's work was nothing to them. They would follow it up by an evening's enjoyment with the keenest appreciation; and they knew how to revel with the best.

The first to arrive at Loon Dyke Farm were the Furrers. Daisy, Fortune, and Rachel, three girls of round proportions, all dressed alike, and of age ranging in the region of twenty. They spoke well and frequently; and their dancing eyes and ready laugh indicated spirits at concert pitch. These three were great friends of Prudence, and were loud in their admiration of her. Peter Furrer, their brother, was with them; he was a red-faced boy of about seventeen, a giant of flesh, and a pigmy of intellect —outside of farming operations. Mrs. Furrer accompanied the party as chaperon—for even in the West chaperons are recognized as useful adjuncts, and, besides, enjoyment is not always a question of age.

Following closely on the heels of the Furrers came old Gleichen and his two sons, Tim and Harry. Gleichen was a well-to-do " mixed " farmer—a widower who was looking out for a partner as staid and robust as himself. His two sons were less of the prairie than their father, by reason of an education at St. John's University in Winnipeg. Harry was an aspirant to Holy Orders, and already had charge of a mission in the small neighbouring settlement of Lakeville. Tim acted as foreman to his father's farm; a boy of enterprising ideas, and who never hesitated to advocate to his steady-going parent the advantage of devoting himself to stock-raising.

Others arrived in quick succession; a truly agricultural gathering. Amongst the latest of the early arrivals were the Ganthorns; mother, son, and daughter, pretentious folk of considerable means, and recently imported from the Old Country.

By half-past seven everybody had arrived with the exception of George Iredale and Leslie Grey. The fun began from the very first.

The dining-table had disappeared from the parlour, as had the rugs from the floor, and somehow a layer of white wax, like an incipient fall of snow, lay invitingly on the bare white pine boarding. And, too, it seemed only natural that the moment she came into the room ready for the fray, Daisy Furrer should make a rush for the ancient piano, and tinkle out with fair execution the strains of an old waltz. Her efforts broke up any sign of constraint; everybody knew everybody else, so they danced. This was the beginning; cards would come later.

They could all dance, and right well, too. Faces devoid of the absorbing properties of powder quickly shone with the exercise; complexions innocent of all trace of pigments and the toilet arts glowed with a healthy hue and beamed with perfect happiness. There could be no doubt that Prudence and her mother knew their world as well as any hostess could wish. And it was all so easy; no formality, few punctilios to observe—just free-and-easy good-fellowship.

Mrs. Malling emerged from the region of the kitchen. She was a little heated with her exertions, and a stray wisp or two of grey hair escaping from beneath her quaint

lace cap testified to her culinary exertions. She had been stooping at her ovens regardless of her appearance. She found her daughter standing beside the door of the parlour engaged in a desultory conversation with Peter Furrer. Prudence hailed her mother with an air of relief, and the monumental Peter moved heavily away.

"Oh, mother dear, it's too bad of you," exclaimed the girl, gazing at her critically. "And after all the trouble I took with your cap! Look at it now. It's all on one side, and your hair is sticking out like—like—Timothy grass. Stand still while I fix it."

The girl's deft fingers soon arranged her mother afresh, the old lady protesting all the while, but submitting patiently to the operation.

"There, there; you children think of nothing but pushing and patting and tittivating. La, but one 'ud think I was going to sit down at table with a King or a Minister of the Church. Nobody's going to look at me, child—until the victuals come on. Besides, what does it matter with neighbours? Look at old Gleichen over there, bowing and scraping to Mrs. Ganthorn; one would think it wasn't his way to do nothing else. He's less elaborate when he's trailing after his plough. My, but I can't abide such pretending. Guess some folks think women are blind. And where's George Iredale? I don't see him. Now there'd be some excuse for his doing the grand. He's a gentleman born and bred."

"Ah, yes, mother, we all know your weakness for Mr. Iredale," replied Prudence, with an affectionate finishing pat to the grey old head. "But then he just wouldn't 'bow and scrape,' as you call it, to Mrs. Ganthorn or anybody else. He's not the sort for that kind of thing. He hasn't come yet. I'll bring him to you at once, dear, when he arrives," she finished up with a laugh.

"You're a saucy hussy," her mother returned, with a chuckle. Then: "But I'd have taken to him as a son. Girls never learn anything now-a-days until they're married to the man they fancy."

"Nothing like personal experience, lady mother. Did you ask any one's advice when you married father?"

"That I didn't for sure, child, but it was different. Your father, Silas, wasn't the man to be put off with any

notions. He just said he was going to marry me—and he did marry me. I was all sort of swept off my feet."

"But still you chose him yourself," persisted the girl, laughing.

"Well, maybe I did, child, maybe I did."

"And *you* didn't regret your own choice, mother; so why should I?"

"Ah, it was different with me—quite different. Ah, there's some one coming in." Hephzibah Malling turned as she spoke, glad to be able to change the subject. The front door was opened, and a fur-clad figure entered. "It's George Iredale," she went on, as the man removed his cap and displayed a crown of dark-brown hair, tinged here and there with grey, a broad high forehead and a pair of serious eyes.

"Come along, George," Mrs. Malling bustled forward, followed by her daughter. "I thought you couldn't get, maybe. The folks are all dancing and dallying. You must come into the kitchen first and have something warm. It's a cold night."

"I meant to come earlier," replied the new arrival, in a deep, quiet voice. "Unfortunately, just as I was going to start, word was brought in to me that a suspicious-looking horseman was hovering round. You see my place is so isolated that any arrival has to be inquired into. There are so many horse-thieves and other dangerous characters about that I have to be careful. Well, I rode out to ascertain who the intruder was, but I lost him. That delayed me. How are you, and Prudence too? Why, it's ages since I've seen either of you. Yes, something hot is always welcome after a long winter's ride."

George Iredale had divested himself of his coat and over-shoes, and now followed his hostess to the kitchen. He was a man of considerable inches, being little short of six feet in height. He was powerfully built, although his clothes disguised the fact to a large extent, and his height made him look even slim. He had a strong, keen, plain face that was very large-featured, and would undoubtedly have been downright ugly but for an expression of kindly patience, not unmixed with a suspicion of amused tolerance. It was the face of a man in whom women like to place confidence, and with whom men never attempt to

take liberties. He had, too, a charm of manner unusual in men living the rough life of the prairie.

The tinkling strains of the waltz had ceased, and Prudence went back to the parlour. She felt that it was high time to set the tables for "progressive euchre." It was past eight and Grey had not turned up. She began to think he intended carrying out his threat of staying away. Well, if he chose to do so he could. She wouldn't ask him to do otherwise. She felt unhappy about him in spite of her brave thoughts.

Her announcement of cards was hailed with delight, and the guests departed with a rush to search the house for a sufficient number of small tables to cope with the requirements of the game.

In the kitchen George Iredale was slowly sipping a steaming glass of rye whisky toddy. He was seated in a rigid, high-backed arm-chair, well away from the huge cook-stove, at which Hephzibah Malling was presiding. Many kettles and saucepans stood steaming upon the black iron top, and the occasional opening and shutting of the ovens told of dainties which needed the old farm-wife's most watchful care. Mrs. Malling's occupation, however, did not interrupt her flow of conversation. George Iredale was a great favourite of hers.

"He's like his poor father in some things," she was saying, as she lifted a batch of small biscuits out of the oven and moved towards the ice-box with them. "He never squealed about his misfortune to me. Not one letter did I get asking for help. He's proud, is Hervey. And now I don't know, I'm sure."

She paused with her hand on the open door of the refrigerator and looked back into the man's face.

"Did he tell you any details of his failure? What was responsible for it?" Iredale asked, poising his glass on one of the unyielding arms of his chair.

"No, that he didn't, not even that," in a tone of pride. "He just said he'd failed. That he was 'broke.' He's too knocked up with travelling—he's come from Winnipeg right here—or you should hear it from his own lips. He never blamed no one."

"Ah—and you are going to help him, Mrs. Malling. What are you going to do?"

"That's where I'm fixed some. Money he can have—all he wants."

Iredale shook his head gravely.

"Bad policy, Mrs. Malling—until you know all the facts."

"What, my own flesh and blood, too? Well there——"

"I mean nothing derogatory to your boy, believe me," interrupted Iredale, as he noted the heightened colour of face and the angry sparkle that flashed in the good dame's eyes. "I simply mean that it is useless to throw good money after bad. Fruit farming is a lottery in which the prizes go to those who take the most tickets. In other words, it is a question of acreage. A small man may lose his crop through blight, drought, a hundred causes. The larger man has a better chance by reason of the extent of his crop. Now I should take it, you could do better for your son by obtaining all the facts, sorting them out and then deciding what to do. My experience prompts me to suggest another business. Why not the farm?"

All signs of resentment had left Mrs. Malling's face. She deposited her biscuits and returned to the stove, standing before her guest with her hands buried deep in her apron pockets and a delighted smile on her face.

"That's just what I thought at once," she said. "You're real smart, George; why not the farm? I says that to myself right off. I couldn't do better, I know, but there's drawbacks. Yes, drawbacks. Hervey isn't much for the petticoats—meaning his own folks. He's not one to play second fiddle, so to speak. Now while I live the farm is mine, and I learned my business from one who could teach me—my Silas. Now I'd make Hervey my foreman and give him a good wage. He'd have all he wants, but he'd have to be *my* foreman." The old lady shook her head dubiously.

"And you think Hervey wouldn't accept a subordinate position?"

"He's that proud. Just like my poor Silas," murmured the mother.

"Then he's a fool. But you try him," Iredale said dryly.

"Do you think he might?"

"You never can tell."

"I wonder now if you—yes, I'll ask him."

"Offer it to him, you mean." George Iredale smiled quietly.

"Yes, offer it to him," the old lady corrected herself thoughtfully. "But I'm forgetting my stewing oysters, and Mistress Prudence will get going on—for she had them sent up all the way from St. John's—if they're burned." She turned to one of the kettles and began stirring at once. "Hervey is coming back after he's been to Niagara, and I'll talk to him then. I wish you could have seen him before he went, but he's abed."

"Never mind, there's time enough when he comes back. Ah, Prudence, how is the euchre 'progressing'?" Iredale turned as the girl came hurriedly in.

"Oh, here you are. You two gossiping as usual. Mother, it's too bad of you to rob me of my guests. But I came to ask for more lemonade."

"Dip it out of yonder kettle, child. And you can take George off at once. It's high time he got at the cards."

"He's too late, the game is nearly over. He'll have to sit out with Leslie. He, also, was too late. Come along, Mr. Iredale,"—she had filled the lemonade pitcher —"and, mother, when shall you be ready with the supper? Remember, you've got to come and give out the prizes to the winners before that."

"Also to the losers," put in Iredale.

"Yes, they must all have prizes. What time, mother?"

"In an hour. And be off, the pair of you. Mary! Mary!" the old lady called out, moving towards the summer kitchen. "Bustle about, girl, and count down the plates from the dresser. La, look at you," she went on, as the hired girl came running in; "where's the cap I gave you? And for good-a-mussey's sake go and scrub your hands. My, but girls be jades."

Iredale and Prudence went off to the parlour. The game was nearly over, and the guests were laughing and chattering noisily. The excitement was intense. Leslie Grey sat aloof. He was engaged in a pretence at conversation with Sarah Gurridge, but, to judge by the expression of his face, his temper was still sulky or his thoughts were far away. The moment Iredale entered the room Grey's face lit up with something like interest.

Prudence, accompanying the rancher, was quick to

observe the change. She had been prepared for something of the sort, although the reason she assigned to his interest was very wide of the mark. She smiled to herself as she turned to reply to something Iredale had just said.

The evening passed in boisterous jollification. And after the prizes had been awarded supper was served. A solid supper, just such a repast as these people could and did appreciate. The delicacies Mrs. Malling offered to her guests were something to be remembered. She spared no pains, and even her enemies, if she had any, which is doubtful, admitted that she could cook; such an admission amongst the prairie folks was a testimonial of the highest order.

After supper George Iredale, whose quiet manner and serious face debarred him from the revels of the younger men, withdrew to a small work-room which was usually set aside on these occasions for the use of those who desired to smoke. Leslie Grey, who had been talking to Mrs. Malling, and who had been watching for this opportunity, quickly followed.

He fondly believed that Iredale came to the farm to thrust his attentions upon Prudence. This was exasperating enough in itself, but when Grey, in his righteous indignation, thought of other matters pertaining to the owner of Lonely Ranch, his indignation rose to boiling pitch. He meant to have it out with him to-night.

Iredale had already adjusted himself into a comfortable chintz-covered arm-chair when Grey arrived upon the scene. A great briar pipe hung from the corner of his strong, decided mouth, and he was smoking thoughtfully.

Grey moved briskly to another chair and flung himself into its depths with little regard for its age. Nor did he attempt to smoke. His mind was too active and disturbed for anything so calm and soothing.

His first words indicated the condition of his mind.

"Kicking up a racket in there," he said jerkily, indicating the parlour. "Can't stand such a noise when I've got a lot to think about."

"No." Iredale nodded his head and spoke without removing the pipe from his mouth.

"We are to be married to-morrow week—Prudence and I."

"So I've been told. I congratulate you."

Iredale looked at his companion with grave eyes. They were quite alone in the room. He had met Grey frequently and had learned to understand his ways and to know his bull-headed methods. Now he quietly waited. He had a shrewd suspicion that the man had something unpleasant to say. Unconsciously his teeth closed tighter upon his pipe.

Grey raised his eyebrows.

"Thanks. I hardly expected it."

"And why not?" Iredale was smiling, his grey eyes had a curious look in them—something between quizzical amusement and surprise.

"Oh, I don't know," the other retorted with a shrug. "There is no telling how some men will take these things."

Iredale removed his pipe and pressed the ash down with his little finger. The operation required the momentary lowering of his eyes from his companion's face.

"I don't think I understand you."

Grey laughed unpleasantly.

"There's not much need of comprehension. If two men run after the same girl and one succeeds where the other fails, the successful suitor doesn't usually expect congratulations from his unfortunate rival."

"Supposing such to be the case in point," Iredale replied quietly, but with an ominous lowering of his eyelids. "Mark you, I only say 'supposing.' I admit nothing—to you. The less successful man may surely be honest enough, and man enough, to wish his rival well. I have known such cases among—men."

Grey twisted himself round in his chair and assumed a truculent attitude.

"Notwithstanding the fact that the rival in question never loses an opportunity of seeking out the particular girl, and continuing his attentions after she is engaged to the other? That may be the way among—men. But not honest men."

The expression of Iredale's face remained quite calm. Only his eyes—keen, direct-gazing eyes—lit up with an angry sparkle. He drew a little more rapidly at his pipe, perhaps, but he spoke quietly still. He quite understood that Grey intended forcing a quarrel upon him.

"I shall not pretend to misunderstand you, Grey. Your manner puts that out of the question. You are unwarrantably accusing me of a most ungentlemanly proceeding. Such an accusation being made by any one —what shall I say?—more responsible than you, I should take considerable notice of; as it is, it is hardly worth my consideration. You are at best a blunderer. I should pause before I replied had I the misfortune to be you, and try to recollect where you are. If you wish to quarrel there is time and place for so doing."

Iredale's words stung Leslie Grey to the quick. His irresponsible temper fairly jumped within him, his eyes danced with rage, and he could scarcely find words to express himself.

"You may sneer as much as you like," he at length blurted out, "but you cannot deny that your visits to this house are paid with the object of addressing my affianced wife. You are right when you describe such conduct as ungentlemanly. You are no gentleman! But I do not suppose that the man who owns Lonely Ranch will feel the sting of being considered a—a—cad or anything else."

"Stop!" Iredale was roused, and there was no mistaking the set of his square jaw and the compression between his brows. "You have gone a step too far. You shall apologize or——"

"Stop—eh? You may well demand that I should—stop, Mr. George Iredale. Were I to go on you would have a distinctly bad time of it. But my present consideration is not with the concerns of Lonely Ranch, but only with your visits here, which shall cease from to-day out. And as for apologizing for anything I have said, I'll see you damned first."

There was a pause; a breathless pause. The two men confronted each other, both held calm by a strength which a moment ago would have seemed impossible in at least one of them.

Grey's face worked painfully with suppressed excitement, but he gripped himself. George Iredale was calm under the effort of swift thought. He was the first to break the silence, and he did so in a voice well modulated and under perfect control. But the mouthpiece of his pipe was nearly bitten through.

"Now I shall be glad if you will go on. You apparently have further charges to make against me. I hardly know whether I am in the presence of a madman or a fool. One or the other, I am sure. You may as well make your charges at once. You will certainly answer for all you have already said, so make the list of your accusations complete before——"

"You fool!" hissed Grey, goaded to the last extremity of patience. His headlong nature could not long endure restraint. Now his words came with a blind rush.

"Do you think I'd speak without being sure of my ground? Do you think, because other men who have occupied the position which is mine at Ainsley have been blind, that I am? Lonely Ranch; a fitting title for your place," with a sneer. "Lonely! in neighbourhood, yes, but not as regards its owner. You are wealthy, probably the wealthiest man in the province of Manitoba; why, that alone should have been sufficient to set the hounds of the law on your trail. I know the secret of Lonely Ranch. I have watched day after day the notice you have inserted in the *Free Press*—'Yellow booming—slump in Grey.' Nor have I rested until I discovered your secret. I shall make no charge here beyond what I have said, but——"

He suddenly broke off, awakening from his blind rage to the fact of what he was doing. His mouth shut like a trap, and beads of perspiration broke out upon his forehead. His eyes lowered before the ironical gaze of his companion. Thus he sat for a moment a prey to futile regrets. His anger had undone him. The sound of a short laugh fell upon his ears, and, as though drawn by a magnet, his eyes once more turned on the face of the rancher.

"I was not sure which it was," said Iredale dryly; "whether you were a fool or a madman. Now I know. I had hoped that it was madness. There is hope for a madman, but none for a fool. Thank you, Grey, for the information you have supplied me with. Your folly has defeated your ends. Remember this. You will never be able to use the 'Secret'—as you are pleased to call it—of Lonely Ranch. I will take good care of that. And now, as I hear sounds of people running up-stairs,

we will postpone further discussion. This interview has been prolonged sufficiently—more than sufficiently for you."

Iredale rose from his chair; to all appearance he was quite undisturbed. Grey's condition was exactly the reverse.

He, too, rose from his seat. There was a sound of some one approaching the door. Grey stepped up to his companion and put his mouth close to his ear.

"Don't forget that you cannot conceal the traces that are round your—ranch. Traces which are unmistakable to those who have an inkling of the truth."

"No, but I can take steps which will effectually nullify the exertions you have been put to. Remember you said I was wealthy. I am tired of your stupid long-winded talk."

Iredale turned away with a movement of disgust and irritation just as the door opened and Prudence came in.

"Ah, here you are, you two. I have been wondering where you were all this time. Do you know the people are going home?"

The girl ceased speaking abruptly and looked keenly at the two men before her. Iredale was smiling; Grey was gazing down at the stove, and apparently not listening to her.

Prudence saw that something was wrong, but she had no suspicion of the truth. She wondered; then she delivered a message she had brought and dismissed Iredale.

"Mother wants to see you, Mr. Iredale; something about Hervey."

"I will go to her at once." And the owner of Lonely Ranch passed out of the room.

The moment the door closed behind him the girl turned anxiously to her lover.

"What is it, Leslie dear? You are not angry with me still?"

The man laughed mirthlessly.

"Angry? No, child. I wonder if I—no, better not. It's time to be off. Give me a kiss, and I'll say good-night."

CHAPTER VII

LESLIE GREY FULFILS HIS DESTINY

It was early morning. Early even for the staff of the Rodney House Hotel. And Leslie Grey was about to breakfast. The solitary waitress the hotel boasted was laying the tables for the eight-o'clock meal. The room had not yet assumed the spick-and-span appearance which it would wear later on. There was a suggestion of last night's supper about the atmosphere; and the girl, too, who moved swiftly here and there arranging the tables, was still clad in her early morning, frowsy print dress, and her hair showed signs of having been hastily adjusted without the aid of a looking-glass. A sight of her suggested an abrupt rising at the latest possible moment.

From the kitchen beyond a savoury odour of steak and coffee penetrated the green baize swing-door which stood at one end of the room.

"Is that steak nearly ready?" asked Grey irritably, as the girl flicked some crumbs from the opposite end of his table on to the floor, with that deft flourish of a dirty napkin which waitresses usually obtain.

She paused in her work, and her hand went up consciously to the screws of paper which adorned her front hair.

"Yessir, it'll be along right now."

Then she continued to flick the table in other directions.

"I ordered breakfast for six o'clock. This is the slackest place I ever knew. I shall talk to Morton and see if things can't be altered. Just go and rouse that cook up. I've got to make Leonville before two."

The girl gave a final angry flick at an imaginary crumb and flounced off in the direction of the kitchen. The next moment her shrill voice was heard addressing the cook.

"Mr. Grey wants his breakfast—sharp, Molly. Dish it up. If it ain't done it's his look-out. There's no pleasing some folks. I s'pose Mr. Chillingwood 'll be along d'rectly. Better put something on for him or there'll be a row. What's that—steak? That ain't no good for Mr. Robb. He wants pork chops. He never eats anything else for breakfast. Says he's used to pork."

The girl returned to the breakfast-room bearing Grey's steak and some potatoes. Coffee followed quickly, and the officer attacked his victuals hungrily. Then Robb Chillingwood appeared.

Leslie Grey was about to rate the girl for her remarks to the cook, but Robb interrupted him.

"Well, how does the bridegroom feel?" he asked cheerily.

"Shut up!"

"What's the matter? Cranky on your wedding morning?" pursued the town clerk irrepressibly.

"I wish to goodness you'd keep your mouth shut. Why don't you go and proclaim my affairs from the steps of your beastly Town Hall?" Grey glanced meaningly in the direction of the waitress standing in open-mouthed astonishment beside one of the tables.

Robb laughed and his eyes twinkled mischievously. He turned sharply on the girl.

"Why, didn't you know that Mr. Grey was going to be married to-day?" he asked, with assumed solemnity. "Well, I'm blessed," as the girl shook her head and giggled. "You neglect your duty, Nellie, my girl. What are you here for but to 'sling hash' and learn all the gossip and scandal concerning the boarders? Yes, Mr. Grey is going to get married to-day, and I—I am to be his best man. Now be off, and fetch my 'mutton'—which is pork."

The girl ran off to do as she was bid, and also to convey the news to her friends in the kitchen. Robb sat down beside his companion and chuckled softly as he gazed at Grey's ill-humoured face, and listened to the shrieks of laughter which were borne on the atmosphere of cooking from behind the baize door.

Grey choked down his indignation. For once he understood that protest would not serve him. Everything

about his marriage had been kept quiet in Ainsley up till now, not because there was any need for it, but Robb had acceded to his expressed wishes. The latter, however, felt himself in no way bound to keep silence on this, the eventful day. Robb attacked some toast as a preliminary, while the other devoured his steak. Then Grey looked up from his plate. His face had cleared; his ill-humour had been replaced by a look of keen earnestness.

"It's a beastly nuisance that this is my wedding day," he began. "Yes, I mean it," as Robb looked up in horrified astonishment. "I don't mean anything derogatory to anybody. I just state an obvious fact. You would understand if you knew all."

"But, damn it, man, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying such a thing. You are marrying one of the best and sweetest girls in Southern Manitoba, and yet—why, it's enough to choke a man off his feed." Chillingwood was angry.

"Don't be a fool. You haven't many brains, I know, but use the few you possess now, and listen to me. A week ago, yes; a week hence, yes. But for the next three days I have some dangerous work on hand that must be done. Work of my department."

"Ah, dirty work, I suppose, or there'd be no 'must' or 'danger' about it."

Grey shrugged.

"Call it what you like. Since you've left the service I notice you look at things differently," he said. "Anyway, it's good enough for me to be determined to see it through in spite of my wedding. Damn it, there's always some obstacle or other cropping up at inopportune moments in my life. However—I wish I knew whether I could still trust you to do something for me. It would simplify matters considerably."

Robb looked serious. He might not be possessed of many brains, as Grey had suggested—although Grey's opinions were generally warped—but he thought well before he replied. And when he spoke he showed considerable decision and foresight.

"You can trust me all right enough if the matter is clean and honest. I'll do nothing dirty for you or anybody else. I've seen too much."

"Oh, it's clean enough. I don't dirty my hands with dishonest dealings. I simply do my duty."

"But your sense of duty is an exaggerated one—peculiar. I notice that it takes the form of any practices which you consider will advance your personal interests."

"It so happens that my 'personal interests' are synonymous with the interests of those I serve. But all I require is the delivery of a letter in Winnipeg, at a certain time on a given date. I can't trust the post for a very particular reason, and as for the telegraph, that wouldn't answer my purpose. I could employ a messenger, but that would not do either—a disinterested messenger could be got at. You, I know, couldn't be—er—influenced. If you fail me, then I must do it myself, which means that I must leave my bride shortly after the ceremony to-day, and not return to her until Friday, more than two days hence. That's how the matter stands. I will pay all your expenses and give you a substantial present to boot. Just for delivering a letter to the chief of police in Winnipeg. I will go and write it at once if you consent."

Robb shook his head doubtfully.

"I must know more than that. First, I must know, in confidence of course, the object of that letter. And, secondly, who is to be the victim of your machinations. Without these particulars you can count me 'out.' I'll be no party to anything I might afterwards have cause to regret."

"That settles it then," replied Grey resentfully. "I can't reveal the name of my 'victim' as you so graphically put it. You happen to know him, I believe, and are on a friendly footing with him." He finished up with a callous laugh.

Robb's eyes shone wickedly.

"By Jove, Grey, you've sunk pretty low in your efforts to regain your lost position. I always knew that you hadn't a particle of feeling in your whole body for any one but yourself, but I didn't think you'd treat me to a taste of your rotten ways. Were it not for the sake of Alice Gordon's chum, the girl you are going to marry, I wouldn't be your best man. You have become utterly impossible, and, after to-day's event, I wash my hands of you. Damn it, you're a skunk!"

Grey laughed loudly, but there was no mirth in his hilarity. It was a heartless, nervous laugh.

"Easy, Robb, don't get on your high horse," he said presently. Then he became silent and a sigh escaped him. "I had to make the suggestion," he went on, after a while. "You are the only man I dared to trust. Confound it, if you must have it, I'm sorry!" The apology came out with a jerk; it seemed to have been literally wrung from him. "Try and forget it, Robb," he went on, more quietly, "we've known each other for so many years."

Robb was slightly mollified, but he was not likely to forget his companion's proposition. He changed the subject.

"Talking of Winnipeg, you know I was up there on business the other day. I had a bit of a shock while I was walking about the depôt waiting for the train to start."

"Oh." Grey was not paying much attention; he was absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Yes," Robb went on. "You remember Mr. Zachary Smith?"

His companion looked up with a violent start.

"Well, I guess. What of him? I'm not likely to forget him easily. There is just one desire I have in life which dwarfs all others to insignificance, and that is to stand face to face with Mr. Zachary Smith," Grey finished up significantly.

"Ah! So I should suppose," Robb went on. "Those are my feelings to a nicety. But I didn't quite realize my desire, and, besides, I wasn't sure, anyhow. A man appeared, just for one moment, at the booking-office door as I happened to pass it. He stared at me, and I caught his eye. Then he beat a retreat before I had called his face to mind—you see, his appearance was quite changed. A moment later I remembered him, or thought I did, and gave chase. But I had lost him, couldn't discover a trace of him, and nearly lost the train into the bargain. Mind, I am not positive of the fellow's identity, but I'd gamble a few dollars on the matter, anyway."

"Lord! I'd have missed fifty trains rather than have lost sight of him. Just our luck," Grey exclaimed violently.

"Well, if he's in the district, we'll come across him again. Perhaps you will have the next chance." Robb pushed his chair back.

"I hope so."

"It was he, right enough," Robb went on meditatively, his cheery face puckered into an expression of perplexity. "He was well dressed, too, in the garb of an ordinary citizen, and looked quite clean and respectable. His face had filled out; but it was his eyes that fixed me. You remember those two great, deep-sunken, cow-eyes of his——" Robb broke off as he saw Grey start. "Why what's up?"

Grey shook himself; then he gazed straight before him. Nor did he heed his companion's question. A strongly-marked pucker appeared between his eyebrows, and a look of uncertainty was upon his face. Robb again urged him.

"You haven't seen him?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Grey.

"What do you mean?"

"I have just remembered something. I came across a—stranger the other day. He was wrapped in furs, and I could only see his eyes. But those eyes were distinctly familiar—'cow'-eyes, I think you said. I was struck with their appearance at the time, but couldn't just realize where I had seen eyes like 'em before." Then he went on reflectively: "But no, it couldn't have been he. Ah——" He broke off and glanced in the direction of the window as the jangle of sleigh-bells sounded outside. "Here's our cutter. Come on."

Robb rose from his seat and brushed the crumbs from off his trousers. There came the sound of voices from the other side of the door.

"Some of the boys," said Robb, with a meaning smile. "It's early for 'em."

"I believe this is your doing," said Grey sulkily.

Robb nodded in the direction of the window.

"You've got a team. This is no 'one-horsed' affair."

The door opened suddenly and two men entered.

"Oh, here he is," said one, Charlie Trellis, the post-master, with a laugh. "Congratulate you, Grey, my friend. Double harness, eh? Tame you down, my boy. Good thing, marriage—for taming a man."

" You're not looking your best," said the other, Jack Broad, the telegraph operator. " Why, man, you look as though you were going to your own funeral. Buck up! Come and have a ' Collins '; brace you up for the ordeal."

" Go to the devil, both of you," said Grey ungraciously. " I don't swill eye-openers all day like you, Jack Broad. Got something else to do."

" So it seems. But cheer up, man," replied Broad imperturbably, " it's not as bad as having a tooth drawn."

" Nor half as unpleasant as a funeral," put in Trellis, with a grin.

Grey turned to Robb.

" Come on," he said abruptly. " Let's get. I shall say things in a minute if I stay here."

" That 'ud be something new for you," called out Broad, as the two men left the room.

The door closed on his remark and he turned to his companion.

" I'm sorry for the poor girl," he went on. " The most cantankerous pig I ever ran up against—is Grey."

" Yes," agreed the other; " I can't think how a decent fellow like Robb Chillingwood can chum up with him. He's a surly clown—only fit for such countries as the Yukon, where he comes from. He's not particularly clever either. Yes," turning to the waitress, " the usual. How would you like to be the bride ? "

The girl shook her head.

" No, thanks. I like candy."

" Ah, not vinegar."

" Nor—nor—pigs."

Broad turned to the grey-headed postmaster with a loud guffaw.

" She seems to have sized Grey up pretty slick."

Outside in the hall the two men donned their furs and over-shoes. Fortunately for Grey's peace of mind there was no one else about. The bar-tender was sweeping the office out, but he did not pause in his work. Outside the front door the livery-stable man was holding the horses. Grey took his seat to drive, and wrapped the robes well about him. It was a bitterly cold morning. Robb was

just about to climb in beside him when a ginger-headed man clad in a pea-jacket came running from the direction of the Town Hall. He waved one arm vigorously, clutching in his hand a piece of paper. Robb saw him first.

"Something for me, as sure as a gun. Hold on, Grey," he said. "It's Sutton, the sheriff. I wonder what's up?"

The ginger-headed man came up breathlessly.

"Thought I was going to miss you, Chillingwood. A message from the Mayor. 'Doc' Ridley sends word that the United States marshal has got that horse-thief, Le Mar, over the other side. You'll have to make out the papers for bringing him over. I've got to go and fetch him at once."

"But, hang it, man, I can't do them now," exclaimed Robb.

"He's on leave of absence," put in Grey.

"Can't be helped. I'm sorry," said the sheriff. "It's business, you know. Besides, it won't take you more than an hour. I must get across to Verdon before noon or it'll be too late to get the papers 'backed' there. Come on, man; you can get another cutter and follow Grey up in an hour. You won't lose much time."

"Yes, and who's going to pay the damage?" said Robb, relinquishing his hold on the cutter's rail.

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll have to stay," he said conclusively.

"I suppose so. Grey, I'm sorry."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," replied Grey coldly. "It's not your fault. Well, good-bye. Don't bother to follow me up."

"Damn!" ejaculated the good-hearted Robb, as the cutter moved away.

"Going to get married, ain't he?" said the sheriff shortly, as Grey departed.

"Yes." And the two men walked off in the direction of Chillingwood's office.

And Grey drove off to his wedding alone. He was denied even the support of the only man who, out of sheer good-heartedness, would have accompanied him. The life of a man is more surely influenced by the peculiarities of his own disposition than anything else. When a man

akes to himself a wife, it is naturally a time for the well-
vishes of his friends. This man set out alone. Not one
God-speed went with him. And yet he was not disturbed
y the lack of sympathy. He looked at life from an un-
ommon standpoint, measuring its scope for the attain-
nent of happiness by his own capacity for doing, not by
ny association with his kind. He was one of those men
vho need no friendship from his fellows, preferring rather
o be without it. Thus he considered he was freer to
ollow his own methods of life. Position was his goal—
osition in the walk of life he had chosen. Could he not
ttain this solely by his own exertions, then he would do
vithout it.

The crisp, morning air smote his cheeks with the sting
f a whip-lash as he drove down the bush-lined trail which
ed from the Rodney House to the railway depôt. It
vas necessary for him to cross the track at this point
efore he would find himself upon the prairie road to the
eonville school-house, at which place the ceremony was
o be performed. The "gush" of the horses' nostrils
ounded refreshingly in his ears as the animals fairly
lanced over the smooth, icy trail. The sleigh-bells jangled
vith a confused clashing of sounds in response to the gait
f the eager beasts. But Grey thought little of these
hings. He thought little of anything just now but his
ntended despoiling of the owner of Lonely Ranch. All
ther matters were quite subsidiary to his one chief
bject.

Once out in the open, the horses settled down into their
ng-distance stride. Here the trail was not so good as
n the precincts of the village. The snow was deeper and
ofter. Now and then the horses' hoofs would break
hrough the frozen crust and sink well above the fetlocks
nto the under-snow.

Now the thick bush, which surrounded the village, gave
lace to a sparser covering of scattered bluffs, and the
rey-white aspect of the country became apparent. The
rail was well marked as far as the eye could reach—two
reat furrows ploughed by the passage of horses and the
unners of the farmers' heavy "double-bobs." Besides
his, the colour was different. There was a strong sug-
estion of earthiness about the trail which was not to be

observed upon the rolling snow-fields of the surrounding prairie.

The air was still though keen, and the morning sun had already risen well above the mist of grey clouds which still hovered above the eastern horizon. There was a striking solemnity over all. It was the morning promise of a fair day, and soon the dazzling sunshine upon the snow would become blinding to eyes unused to the winter prairie.

But Grey was no tenderfoot. Such things had no terrors for him. His half-closed eyes faced the glare of light defiantly. It is only the inexperienced who gaze across the snow-bound earth, at such a time, with wide-open eyes.

The bluffs became scarcer as mile after mile was covered by the long, raking strides of the hardy horses. Occasionally Grey was forced to pull off the trail into the deep snow to allow the heavy-laden hay-rack of some farmer to pass, or a box-sleigh, weighted down with sacks of grain, toiling on its way to the Ainsley elevator. These inconveniences were the rule of the road, the lighter always giving way to the heavier conveyance.

Ten miles from Ainsley and the wide open sea of snow proclaimed the prairie in its due form. Not a tree in sight, not a rock, not a hill to break the awful monotony. Just one vast rolling expanse of snow gleaming beneath the dazzling rays of a now warming sun. A hungry coyote and his mate prowling in search of food at a distance of half-a-mile looked large by reason of their isolation. An occasional covey of prairie chicken, noisily winging their way to a far-distant bluff, might well be startling both to horses and driver. A dark ribbon-like flight of ducks or geese, high up in the heavens, speeding from the south to be early in the field when the sodden prairie should be open, was something to distract the attention of even the most preoccupied. But Grey was oblivious to everything except the trail beneath him, the gait of his team, and his scheme for advancement.

The sun mounted higher, and the time passed rapidly to the traveller. And, as the record of mileage rose, the face of the snow-clad earth began again to change its appearance. The undulations of the prairie assumed

vaster proportions. The waves rose to the size of hills, and the gentle hollows sank deeper until they declined into gaping valleys. Here and there trees and small clumps of leafless bush dotted the view. A house or two, with barn looming largely in the rear, and spidery fencing, stretching in rectangular directions, suggested homesteads; the barking of dogs—life. These signs of habitation continued, and became now more frequent, and now, again, more rare. The hills increased in size and the bush thickened. Noon saw the traveller in an " up-and-down " country intersected by ice-bound streams and snow-laden hollows. The timber became more heavy, great pine trees dominating the more stunted growths, and darkening the outlook by reason of their more generous vegetation. On the eastern extremity of this belt of country stood the school-house of Leonville; beyond that the undulating prairie again on to Loon Dyke Farm.

Leslie Grey looked at his watch; the hands indicated a near approach to the hour of one. He had yet three miles to go to reach his destination. He had crossed a small creek. A culvert bridged it, but the snow upon either side of the trail was so deep in the hollow that no indication of the woodwork was visible. It was in such places as these that a watchful care was needed. The smallest divergence from the beaten track would have precipitated the team and cutter into a snowdrift from which it would have been impossible to extricate it without a smash-up. Once safely across this he allowed the horses to climb the opposite ascent leisurely. They had done well—he had covered the distance in less than six hours.

The hill was a mass of redolent pinewoods. It was as though the gradual densifying of this belt of woodland country had culminated upon the hill. The brooding gloom of the forest was profound. The dark-green foliage of the pines seemed black by contrast with the snow, and gazing in amongst the leafless lower trunks was like peering into a world of dayless night. The horses walked with ears pricked and wistful eyes alertly gazing. The darkness of their surroundings seemed to have conveyed something of its mysterious dread to their sensitive nerves. Tired they might be, but they were ready to shy at each rustle of the heavy branches, as some stray

breath of air bent them lazily and forced from them a creaking protest.

As the traveller neared the summit the trail narrowed down until a hand outstretched from the conveyance could almost have brushed the tree-trunks.

Grey's eyes were upon his horses and his thoughts were miles away. Ahead of him gaped the opening in the trees which marked the brow of the hill against the skyline. He had traversed the road many times on his way to Loon Dyke Farm and knew every foot of it. It had no beauties for him. These profound woods conveyed nothing to his unimpressionable mind; not even danger, for fear was quite foreign to his nature. This feeling of security was more the result of his own lofty opinion of himself, and the contempt in which he held all law-breakers, rather than any high moral tone he possessed. Whatever his faults, fear was a word which found no place in his vocabulary. A nervous or imaginative man might have conjured weird fancies from the gloom with which he found himself surrounded at this point. But Leslie Grey was differently constituted.

Now, as he neared the summit of the hill, he leant slightly forward and gathered up the lines which he had allowed to lie slack upon his horses' backs. A resounding "chirrup" and the weary beasts strained at their neck-yoke. Something moving in amongst the trees attracted their attention. Their snorting nostrils were suddenly thrown up in startled attention. The off-side horse jumped sideways against its companion, and the sleigh was within an ace of fouling the trees. By a great effort Grey pulled the animals back to the trail and his whip fell heavily across their backs. Then he looked up to discover the cause of their fright. A dark figure, a man clad in a black sheepskin coat, stood like a statue between two trees.

His right arm was raised and his hand gripped a levelled pistol. For one brief instant Grey surveyed the apparition, and he scarcely realized his position. Then a sharp report rang out, ear-piercing in the grim silence, and his hands went up to his chest and his eyes closed.

The next moment the eyes, dull, almost unseeing, opened again, he swayed forward as though in great pain,

then with an effort he flung himself backwards, settling himself against the unyielding back of the seat; his face looked drawn and grey, nor did he attempt to regain the reins which had dropped from his hands. The horses, unrestrained, broke into a headlong gallop; fright urged them on and they raced down the trail, keeping to the beaten track with their wonted instinct, even although mad with fear. A moment later and the sleigh disappeared over the brow of the hill.

All became silent again, except for the confused, distant jangle of the sleigh-bells on the horses' backs. The dark figure moved out on to the trail, and stood gazing after the sleigh. For a full minute he stood thus. Then he turned again and swiftly became lost in the black depths whence he had so mysteriously appeared.

CHAPTER VIII

GREY'S LAST WORDS

RIGID, hideous, stands the Leonville school-house sharply outlined against the sky, upon the summit of a high, rising ground. It stands quite alone as though in proud distinction for its classic vocation. Its flat, uninteresting sides; its staring windows; its high-pitched roof of warped shingles; its weather-boarding, innocent of paint; its general air of neglect; these things strike one forcibly in that region of Nature's carefully-finished handiwork.

However, its cheerless aspect was for the moment rendered less apparent than usual by reason of many people gathered about the storm-porch, and the number and variety of farmers' sleighs grouped about the two tying-posts which stood by the roadside in front of it. An unbroken level of smooth prairie footed one side of the hill, whilst at the back of the house stretched miles of broken, hilly woodland.

The wedding party had arrived from Loon Dyke Farm. Hephzibah Malling had gathered her friends together, and all had driven over for the happy event amidst the wildest enthusiasm and excited anticipation. Each girl, clad in her brightest colours beneath a sober outer covering of fur, was accompanied by her attendant swain, the latter well oiled about the hair and well bronzed about the face, and glowing as an after-effect of the liberal use of soap and water. A wedding was no common occurrence, and, in consequence, demanded special mark of appreciation. No work would be done that day by any of those who attended the function.

But the enthusiasm of the moment had died out at the first breath of serious talk—talk inspired by the non-appearance of the bridegroom. The hour of the ceremony

was close at hand and still he had not arrived. He should have been the first upon the scene. The elders were agitated, the younger folk hopeful and full of excuses for the belated groom, the minister fingered his great silver timepiece nervously. He had driven over from Lakeville, at much inconvenience to himself, to officiate at the launching of his old friend's daughter upon the high seas of wedded life.

The older ladies had rallied to Mrs. Malling's side. The younger people held aloof. There was an ominous grouping and eager whispering, and eyes were turned searchingly upon the grey trail which stretched winding away towards the western horizon.

The Rev. Charles Danvers, the Methodist minister of Lakeville, was the central figure of the situation, and at whom the elder ladies fired their comments and suggestions. There could be no doubt, from the nature and tone of these remarks, that a panic was spreading.

"It's quite too bad, you know," said Mrs. Covill, an iron-grey haired lady of decided presence and possessing a hooked nose. "I can't understand it in a man of Mr. Grey's business-like ways. Now he's just the sort of man whom I should have expected would have been here at least an hour before it was necessary."

"It is just his sort that fail on these occasions," put in Mrs. Ganthorn pessimistically. "He's just too full of business for my fancy. What is the time now, Mr. Danvers?"

"On the stroke of the half-hour," replied the parson, with a gloomy look. "My eyesight is not very good; can I see anything on the trail, or is that black object a bush?"

"Bush," said some one shortly.

"Ah," ejaculated the parson. Then he turned to Mrs. Malling, who stood beside him staring down the trail with unblinking eyes. Her lips were pursed and twitching nervously. "There can have been no mistake about the time, I suppose?"

"Mistake? No," retorted the good lady with irritation. "Folks don't make no mistake about the hour of their wedding. Not the bridegroom, anyway. No, it's an accident, that's what it is, as sure as my name's Hephzibah Malling. And that's what comes of his staying at

Ainsley when he ought to have been hereabouts. To think of a man driving forty odd miles to get married. La' sakes! It just makes me mad with him. There's my girl there most ready to cry her eyes out on her wedding morning, and small blame to her neither. It's a shame, and I'm not the one to be likely to forget to tell him so when he comes along. If he were my man he'd better his ways, I know."

No one replied to the old lady's heated complaint. They all too cordially agreed with her to defend the recalcitrant bridegroom. Mr. Danvers drew out his watch for at least the twentieth time.

"Five minutes overdue," he murmured. Then aloud and in a judicial tone: "We must allow him some margin. But, as you say, it certainly was a mistake his remaining at Ainsley."

"Mistake—mistake, indeed," Mrs. Malling retorted, with all the scorn she was capable of. "He's that foolheaded that he won't listen to no reason. Why couldn't he have stopped at the farm? Propriety—fiddlesticks!" Her face was flushed and her brow ominously puckered; she folded her fat hands with no uncertain grip across the slight frontal hollow which answered her purpose for a waist. Her anger was chiefly based upon alarm, and that alarm was not alone for her daughter. She was anxious for the man himself, and her anxiety found vent in that peculiar angry protest which is so little meant by those who resort to it. The good dame was on pins and needles of nervous suspense. Had Grey suddenly appeared upon the scene doubtless her kindly face would have at once wreathed itself into a broad expanse of smiles. But the moments flew by and still the little group waited for the coming which was so long delayed.

Three of the young men approached the agitated mother from the juvenile gathering. Their faces were solemn. Their own optimism had given way before the protracted delay. Tim Gleichen and Peter Furrers came first, Andy, the choreman, brought up the rear.

"We've been thinking," said Tim, feeling it necessary to explain the process which had brought them to a certain conclusion, "that maybe we might just drive down the trail to see if we can see anything of him, Mrs. Malling.

Ye can't just say how things have gone with him. Maybe he's struck a 'dump' and his sleigh's got smashed up. There's some tidy drifts to come through, and it's dead easy to get dumped in 'em. Peter and Andy here have volunteered to go with me."

"That's real sensible of you, Tim," replied Mrs. Malling, with an air of relief. She felt quite convinced that an accident had happened. She turned to the minister. In this matter she considered he was the best judge. Like many of her neighbours she looked to the minister as the best worldly as well as spiritual adviser of his flock. "Like as not the boys will be able to help him?" she suggested, in a tone of inquiry.

"I don't think I should let them go yet," the man of the cloth replied. "I should give him an hour. It seems to me it will be time enough then. Ah, here's Mrs. Gurridge," as that lady appeared in the doorway. "There's no sign of him," he called out in anticipation of her inquiry. "I hope you are not letting the bride worry too much."

"It's too dreadful," said Mrs. Ganthorn, as her thoughts reverted to Prudence waiting in the school-ma'am's sitting-room.

"Whatever can have happened to him?"

"That's what's been troubling us this hour and more," snapped the girl's mother. She was in no humour to be asked silly questions, however little they were intended to be answered.

She turned to Sarah. In this trouble the peaceful Sarah would act as oil on troubled waters.

Sarah understood her look of inquiry.

"She's bearing up bravely, Hephzibah. She's not one of the crying sort. Too much of your Silas in her for that. I've done my best to console her."

She did not say that she had propounded several mottoes more or less suitable to the occasion, which had been delivered with great unction to the disconsolate girl. Prudence had certainly benefited by the good woman's company, but not in the way Sarah had hoped and believed. It was the girl's own sense of humour which had helped her.

Mrs. Malling turned away abruptly. Her red face had

grown a shade paler, and her round, brown eyes were suspiciously watery. But she gazed steadily down the trail on which all her hopes were set. The guests stood around in respectful silence. The party which had arrived so light-heartedly had now become as solemn as though they had come to attend a funeral. The minister continued to glance at his watch from time to time. He had probably never in his life so frequently referred to that faithful companion of his preaching hours. Tim Gleichen and Peter Furrers and Andy had moved off in the direction of the sleighs. The others followed Mrs. Malling's example and bent their eyes upon the vanishing point of the trail.

Suddenly an ejaculation escaped one of the bystanders. Something moving had just come into view. All eyes concentrated upon a black speck which was advancing rapidly in a cloud of ground snow. Hope rose at a bound to wild, eager delight. The object was a sleigh. And the speed at which it was coming down the trail told them that it was bearing the belated bridegroom, who, conscious of his fault, was endeavouring to make up the lost time. Mrs. Malling's round face shone again in her relief, and a sigh of content escaped her. Word was sent at once to the bride, and all was enthusiasm again. Then followed a terrible shock. Peter Furrer, more long-sighted than the rest, delivered it in a boorish fashion all his own.

"Ther' ain't no one aboard of that sleigh," he called out. "Say, them plugs is just boltin'. Gum, but they be comin' hell-belt-fer-leckshuns." Every one understood his expression, and faces that a moment before had been radiant with hope changed their expression with equal suddenness to doubt, then in a moment to apprehension.

"You don't say——" Mrs. Malling gasped; it was all she could say.

"It can't——" The minister got no further, and he fingered his watch from force of habit.

"It's——" some one said and broke off. Then followed an excited murmur. "What's Peter going to do?"

The young giant had darted off down the trail in the direction of the approaching sleigh. He lurched heavily over the snow, his ungainly body rolling to his gait, but

he was covering ground in much the same way that a racing elephant might. His stride carried him along at a great pace. The onlookers wondered and exclaimed, their gaze alternating in amazement between the two objects, the on-coming sleigh and the huge lurching figure of the boy.

Now the sleigh was near enough for them to note the truth of Peter's statement. The horses, ungoverned by any guiding hand, were tearing along at a desperate pace. The cutter bumped and swayed in a threatening manner; now it was lifted bodily from the trail as its runners struck the banked sides of the furrows; now it balanced on one side, hovering between overturning and righting itself, now on the other; then again it would jerk forward with a rush on to the heels of the affrighted horses with maddening effect. The poor brutes stretched themselves wildly to escape from their terror. On they came amidst a whirl of flying snow, and Peter had halted beside the trail awaiting them.

Those who were watching saw the boy move outside the beaten track. Already the panting of the runaways could be heard by those looking on. If the animals were not stayed in their mad career they must inevitably crash into the school-house or collide with the sleighs at the tying-posts. There was no chance of their leaving the beaten trail, for they were prairie horses.

Some of the men, as the realization of this fact dawned upon them, hurried away to remove their possessions to some more secure position, but most of them remained gaping at the runaway team.

Now they saw Peter crouch down, beating the snow under his feet to give himself a firm footing. Barely fifty yards separated him from the sleigh. He settled himself into an attitude as though about to spring. Nearer drew the sleigh. The boy's position was fraught with the greatest danger. The onlookers held their breath. What did he contemplate? Peter had methods peculiar to himself, and those who looked wondered. Nearer—nearer came the horses. A moment more and the boy was lost in the cloud of snow which rose beneath the horses' speeding feet. A sigh broke from many of the ladies as they saw him disappear. Then, next, there came

an exclamation of relief as they saw his bulky figure struggling wildly to draw himself up over the high back of the sleigh. It was no easy task, but Peter's great strength availed him. They saw him climb over and stand upon the cushion, then, for a moment, he looked down as though in doubt.

At last he leaned forward, and, laying hold of the rail of the incurved dashboard, he climbed laboriously out on to the setting of the sleigh's tongue. The flying end of one of the reins was waving annoyingly beyond his reach. He ventured out further, still holding to the dashboard, which swayed and bent under the unaccustomed weight. Suddenly he made a grab and caught the elusive strap and overbalanced in the effort. He came within an ace of falling, but was saved by lurching on to the quarters of one of the horses. With a struggle he recovered himself and regained the sleigh. The rest was the work of a few seconds.

Bracing himself, he leant his whole weight on the single rein. The horses swerved at once, and leaving the trail plunged into the deep snow. The frantic animals fell, recovered themselves, and floundered on, then with a great jolt the sleigh turned over. Peter shot clear of the wreck, but with experience of such capsizes, he clung tenaciously to the rein. He was dragged a few yards; then, trembling and ready to start off again at a moment's notice, the jaded beasts stood.

There was a rush of men to Peter's assistance. The women followed. But the latter never reached the sleigh. Something clad in the brown fur of the buffalo was lying beside the trail where the cutter had overturned. Here they came to a stand, and found themselves gazing down upon the inanimate form of Leslie Grey.

It was a number of the younger ladies of the party who reached the injured man first; the Furrer girls and one of the Miss Covills. They paused abruptly within a couple of yards of the fur-clad object and craned forward, gazing down at it with horrified eyes. The next minute they were thrust aside by the parson. He came, followed by Mrs. Malling.

In a moment he had thrown himself upon his knees and was looking into the pallid face of the prostrate man, and almost unconsciously his hand pushed itself in through

the fastenings of the fur coat. He withdrew it almost instantly, giving vent to a sharp exclamation. It was covered with blood.

" Stand back, please, everybody," he commanded.

He was obeyed implicitly. But his order came too late. They had seen the blood upon his hand.

Miss Ganthorn began to faint and was led away. Other girls looked as though they might follow suit. Only Hephzibah Malling stood her ground. Her face was blanched, but her mouth was tightly clenched. She uttered no sound. All her anger against the prostrate man had vanished; a world of pity was in her eyes as she silently looked on.

The parson summoned some of the men.

" Bear a hand, boys," he said, in a business-like tone which deceived no one. " We'd better get him into the house." Then, seeing Mrs. Malling, he went on, " Get Prudence away at once. She must not see."

The old farm-wife hurried off, and the others gently raised the body of the unconscious man and bore it towards the house.

Thus did Leslie Grey attend his wedding.

The body was taken in by a back way to Sarah Gurridge's bedroom and laid upon the bed. Tim Gleichen was dispatched at once to Lakeville for the doctor. Then, dismissing everybody but Harry Gleichen, Mr. Danvers proceeded to remove the sick man's outer clothing.

The room was small, the one window infinitely so. A single sunbeam shone coldly in through the latter and lit up the well-scrubbed bare floor. There was nothing but the plainest of " fixings " in the apartment, but they had been set in position by the deft hand of a woman of taste. The bed on which the unconscious man had been placed was narrow and hard. Its coverlet was a patchwork affair of depressing hue.

Mr. Danvers bent to his work with a full appreciation of the tragedy which had happened. His face was solemn, and expressive of the most tender solicitude for the injured man. In a whisper he dispatched his assistant for warm water and bandages, whilst he unfastened and removed the fur coat. Inside the clothing was saturated with still warm blood. The minister's lips tightened as

the truth of what had happened slowly forced itself upon his mind.

So absorbed was he in his ministrations that he failed to heed the sound of excited whisperings which came to him from beyond the door. It was not until the creaking of the hinges had warned him that the door was ajar, that he looked up from his occupation. At that moment there was a rustle of silk, the noise of swift footsteps across the bare boards, and Prudence was at the opposite side of the bed.

The soft oval of the girl's face was drawn, and deep lines of anxious thought had broken up the smooth expanse of her forehead. Her eyes seemed to be straining out of their sockets, and the whites were bloodshot. She did not speak, but her look displayed an anguish unspeakable. Her eyes were turned upon the face of the prostrate man; she did not appear to see the minister. Her look suggested some mute question, which seemed to pass from her troubled eyes to the silent figure. Watching her, Danvers understood that, for the present, it would be dangerous to break the dreadful silence that held her. He stooped again and drew back the waistcoat and began to cut away the under-garments from Grey's chest.

Swiftly as the minister's deft fingers moved about the man's body, his thoughts travelled faster. He was not a man given to morbid sentimentality; his calling demanded too much of the practical side of human nature. He was there to aid his flock, materially as well as spiritually, but at the moment he felt positively sick in the stomach with sorrow and pity for the woman who stood like a statue on the other side of what he knew to be this man's deathbed. He dared not look over at her again. Instead, he bent his head lower and concentrated his mind on the work before him.

The silence continued, broken only by an occasional heavy gasp of breath from the girl. The dripping shirt was cut clear of the man's chest, and the woollen undershirt was treated in a similar manner. The exposed flesh was crimson with the blood which was slowly oozing from a small wound a few inches higher up in the chest than where the heart was so faintly beating. One glance sufficed to tell the parson that medical aid would be useless. The wound was through the lungs.

For a moment he hesitated. His better sense warned him to keep silence, but pity urged him to speak. Pity swayed him with the stronger hand.

"He is alive," he said. And the next moment he regretted his words.

The tension of the girl's dreadful expression relaxed instantly. It was as the lifting of a dead weight which had crushed her heart within her. She had been numbed, paralyzed. Actual suffering had not been hers, she had experienced a suspension of feeling which had resulted from the shock. But that suspension was far more dreadful than the most acute suffering. Her whole soul had asked her senses, "What is it?" and the waiting for the answer had been to her in the nature of a blank.

The minister's low murmured sentence had supplied her with an answer. "He is alive." The words touched the springs of life within her and a glad flush swept over her straining nerves. Reason once more resumed its sway, and thought flowed through her brain in an unchecked torrent. It seemed to Prudence as though some barrier had suddenly shut off the simple life which had always been hers, and had opened out for her a fresh existence in which she found herself alone with the still, broken body of her lover. For one brief instant her lips quivered, and a faint in-catching of the breath told of the woman, which, at the first return of feeling, had leapt uppermost in her. But before the maturity of emotion brought about the breakdown, a calm strength came to her aid and steadied her nerves and checked the tears which had so suddenly come into her eyes. Women are like this. At a crisis in sickness they rise superior to all emotion. When the crisis is past, whether for good or ill, it is different.

The water was brought, and the minister set about cleaning the discoloured flesh, while Prudence looked on in silence. She was very pale, and her eyes were painfully bright. While her gaze followed the gentle movements of the minister, her thoughts were running swiftly over the scenes of her life in which the wounded man had played his part. She remembered every look of the now closed eyes, and every expression of his well-loved features. She called to mind his words of hope,

and the carefully-laid plans for his advancement. Nor was there any taint of his selfishness in her recollection of these things. Everything about him, to her, was good and true. She loved him with all the passionate intensity of one who had only just attained to perfect womanhood. He had been to her something of a hero, by reason of his headstrong, dominating ways—ways which more often attract the love of woman in the first flush of her youth than in her maturer, more experienced years.

The sponging cleaned the flesh of the ghastly stain, and the small wound with its blackened rim lay revealed in all its horrid significance. The girl's eyes fixed themselves on it, and for some seconds she watched the blood as it welled up to the surface. The meaning of the puncture forced itself slowly upon her mind, and she realized that it was no accident which had laid her lover low. Her eyes remained directed towards the crimson flow, but their expression had changed, as had the set of her features. A hard, relentless look had replaced the one of tender pity —a look which indexed a feeling more strong than any other in the human organism. She was beginning to understand now that a crime had been committed, and a vengeful hate for some person unknown possessed her.

She pointed at the wound, and her voice sounded icily upon the stillness of the room.

"That," she said. "They have murdered him."

"He has been shot." The parson looked up into the girl's face.

Then followed a pause. Sarah Gurridge and Prudence's mother stole softly in and approached the bedside. The former carried a tumbler of brandy in her hand and came to Mr. Danvers's side; Mrs. Malling ranged herself beside her daughter, but the latter paid no heed to her.

The farm-wife lifted the girl's hand from the bed-post and caressed it in loving sympathy. Then she endeavoured to draw her away.

"Come, child, come with me. You can do no good here."

Prudence shook her off roughly. Nor did she answer. Her mother did not renew her attempt.

All watched while Danvers forced some of the spirit between Grey's tightly-closed lips and then stood up to note the effect.

He was actuated by a single thought. He knew that the man was doomed, but he hoped that consciousness might be restored before the tiny spark of life burnt itself out. There was something to be said if human aid could give the dying man the power to say it. Prudence seemed to understand the minister's motive, for she vaguely nodded her approval as she saw the spirit administered.

All waited eagerly for the sign of life which the stimulating properties of the spirit might reveal. The girl allowed her thoughts to drift away to the lonely trail over which her lover had driven. She saw in fancy the crouching assailants firing from the cover of some wayside bluff. She seemed to hear many shots, to see the speeding horses, to hear the dull sound of the fatal bullet as her man was hit. She pictured to herself the assassins, with callous indifference, as the cutter passed out of view, mounting their horses and riding away. Her thoughts had turned to the only criminals she understood—horse-thieves.

The sign of life which had been so anxiously awaited came at last. It was apparent in the flicker of the wax-like eyelids; in the faintest of sighs from between the colourless lips. Danvers bent again over the dying man and administered more of the spirit. It took almost instantaneous effect. The eyelids half opened and the mouth distinctly moved. The action was like that of one who is parched with thirst. Grey gasped painfully, and a strange rattle came from his throat.

Danvers shook his head as he heard the sound. Prudence, whose eyes had never left the dying man's face, spoke sharply. She voiced a common thought.

"Who did it, Leslie?"

The minister nodded approval. For a moment his eyes rested admiringly on the girl's eager face. Her courage astonished him. Then, as he read her expression aright, his wonder lessened. The gulf is bridged by a single span at the point of transition from the girl to the woman. He understood that she had crossed that bridge.

Grey struggled to speak, but only succeeded in uttering an inarticulate sound. The minutes dragged. The suspense was dreadful. They all realized that he was fast sinking, but in every heart was a hope that he would speak,

would say one word which might give some clue to what had happened.

The minister applied the rest of the brandy. The dying man's breathing steadied. The eyes opened wider. Prudence leaned forward. Her whole soul was in the look she bestowed upon the poor drawn face, and in the tones of her voice.

"Leslie, Leslie, speak to me. My poor, poor boy. Tell me, how did it happen? Who did it?"

The man gasped in response. He seemed to be making one last great struggle against the overwhelming weakness which was his. His head moved and a feeble cough escaped his lips. The girl put her arm under his head and slightly raised it, and the dying eyes looked into hers. She could no longer find words to utter; great passionate sobs shook her slight frame, and scalding tears coursed down her cheeks and fell upon the dingy coverlet.

A whistling breath came from between the dying man's parted lips, and culminated in a hoarse rattling in his throat. Then his body moved abruptly, and one arm lifted from the elbow-joint, the head half turned towards the girl, and words distinct, but halting, came from the working lips.

"He—he—did—it. *Free—P—Press.* Yell—ow—G——" The last word died away to a gurgle. A violent fit of coughing seized the dying man, then it ceased suddenly. His head weighed like lead upon the girl's supporting hand, and a thin trickle of blood bubbled from the corners of his mouth. Prudence withdrew her arm from beneath him and replaced the head upon the pillow. Her tears had ceased to flow now.

"He is dead," she said with studied calmness, as she straightened herself up from the bed.

She moved a step or two away. Then she paused uncertainly and gazed about her like one dazed. Her mother went towards her, but before she reached her side Prudence uttered a strange, wild cry and rushed from the room, tearing wildly at the fastenings of her silk dress as though to rid herself of the mocking reminder of that awful day.

CHAPTER IX

LONELY RANCH AT OWL HOOT

In spite of the recent tragic events the routine of the daily life at Loon Dyke Farm was very little interfered with. Just for a few weeks following upon the death of Leslie Grey the organization of Mrs. Malling's household had been thrown out of gear.

The coming of the police and the general scouring of the country for the murderers of the Customs officer had entailed a " nine days' wonder " around the countryside, and had helped to disturb the wonted peace of the farm. But the search did not last long. Horse-thieves do not wait long in a district, and the experience of the " riders of the plains " taught them that it would be useless to pursue where there was no clue to guide them. The search was abandoned after a while, and the dastardly murder remained an unsolved mystery.

The shock to Prudence's nervous system had been a terrible one, and a breakdown, closely bordering upon brain fever, had followed. The girl's condition had demanded the utmost care, and, in this matter, Sarah Gurridge had proved herself a loyal friend. Dr. Parash, with conscientious soundness of judgment, had ordered her removal for a prolonged sojourn to city life in Toronto; a course which, in spite of heartbroken appeal on the girl's part, her mother insisted upon carrying out with Spartan-like resolution.

" Broken hearts," she had said to Sarah, during a confidential chat upon the subject, " are only kept from mending by them as talks sympathy. There isn't nothin' like mixing with folks what's got their own troubles to worrit over. She'll get all that for sure when she gets to one o' them cities. Cities is full of purgat'ry," she added profoundly. " I shall send her down to sister Emma, she's

one o' them hustlin' women that'll never let the child rest a minute."

And Sarah had approved feelingly.

So Prudence was safely dispatched eastwards for an indefinite period before the spring opened. But Hephzibah Malling had yet to realize that her daughter had suddenly developed from a child, who looked to her mother's guidance in all the more serious questions of life, into a woman of strong feelings and opinions. This swift casting off of the fetters of childhood had been the work of those few passionate moments at the bedside of her dying lover.

Prudence had submitted to the sentence which her mother, backed by the doctor's advice, had passed, and she went away. But in complying with the order she had performed the last act which childhood's use had prompted. The period of her absence was indefinite. The fiat demanded no limitation to her stay with " sister " Emma. She could return when she elected so to do. Bred in the pure air of the prairie, no city could claim her for long. And so she returned to the farm against all opposition within two months of leaving it.

The spring brought another change to the farm, a change which was as welcome to the old farm-wife as the opening of the spring itself. Hervey returned from Niagara, bringing with him the story of the failure of his mission. True to herself and the advice of Iredale, Hephzibah made her proposition to her son, with the result that, with some show of distaste, he accepted the situation, and with his three-legged companion took up his abode at the farm.

And so the days lengthened and the summer heat increased; the hay in the sloughs ripened and filled the air with its refreshing odours; the black squares of ploughed land were quickly covered with the deepening carpet of green, succulent grain; the wild currant-bushes flowered, and the choke-cherries ripened on the laden branches, and the deep blue vault of the heavens smiled down upon the verdant world.

George Iredale again became a constant and welcome visitor at the farm, nor in her leisure did Sarah Gurridge seek relaxation in any other direction.

The morning was well advanced. The air was still and very hot. There was a peaceful drowsiness about the

farm buildings and yard which was only broken by the occasional squeal of the mouching swine routing amongst any stray garbage their inquisitive eyes happened to light upon. The upper half of the barn door stood open, and in the cool shade of the interior could be seen the outline of dark, well-rounded forms looming between the heel-posts of the stalls which lined the side walls. An occasional impatient stamp from the heavily-shod hoofs told of the capacity for annoyance of the ubiquitous fly or aggravating mosquito, whilst the steady grinding sound which pervaded the atmosphere within, and the occasional "gush" of distended nostrils testified to healthy appetites, and noses buried in mangers well filled with sweet-smelling "Timothy" hay.

The kitchen doorway was suddenly filled with the ample proportions of Hephzibah Malling. She moved out into the open. She was carrying a large pail filled with potato-parings and other fragments of culinary residuum. A large white sun-bonnet protected her grey head and shaded her now flaming face from the sun, and her dress, a neat study in grey, was enveloped in a huge apron.

She moved out to a position well clear of the buildings and began to call out in a tone of persuasive encouragement—

"Tig—tig—tig! Tig—tig—tig!"

She repeated her summons several times, then moved on slowly, continuing to call at intervals.

The swine gathered with a hungry rush at her heels, and their chorus of acclamation drowned her familiar cry. Passing down the length of the barn she reached a cluster of thatched mud hovels. Here she opened the crazy gate to admit her clamorous flock, and then deposited the contents of her pail in the trough provided for that purpose. The pigs fell-to with characteristic avidity, complaining vociferously the while as only pigs will.

She stood for a few moments looking down at her noisy charges with calculating eyes. It was a fine muster of young porkers, and the old lady was estimating their bacon-yielding capacity.

Suddenly her reflections were interrupted by the sound of footsteps, and turning, she saw Hervey crossing the yard in the direction of the creamery. She saw him disappear

down the steps which led to the door, for the place was in the nature of a dugout. She sighed heavily and moved away from her porkers, and slowly she made her way to the wash-house. The sight of this man had banished all her feelings of satisfaction. Her son was a constant trouble to her; a source of grave worry and anxiety. Her hopes of him had been anything but fulfilled.

In the meantime Hervey had propped himself against the doorway of the creamery and was talking to his sister within. The building, like all dugouts, was long and low; its roof was heavily thatched to protect the interior from the effects of the sun's rays. Prudence was moving slowly along the two wide counters which lined the walls from one end to the other. Each counter was covered with a number of huge milk-pans, from which the girl was carefully skimming the thick, yellow cream. She worked methodically; and the rich fat dropped with a heavy "plonk" into the small pail she carried, in a manner which testified to the quality of the cream.

She looked a little paler than usual; the healthy bloom had almost entirely disappeared from her cheeks, and dark shadows surrounded her brown eyes. But this was the only sign she displayed of the tragedy which had come into her young life. The trim figure was unimpaired, and her wealth of dark hair was as carefully adjusted as usual. Hervey watched his sister's movements as she passed from pan to pan.

"Iredale wants me to ride over to Owl Hoot to-day," he said slowly. "We're going to have an afternoon's 'chicken shoot.' He says the prairie-chicken round his place are as thick as mosquitoes. He's a lucky beggar. He seems to have the best of everything. I've scoured our farm all over and there's not so much as a solitary grey owl to get a pot at. I hate the place."

Prudence ceased working and faced him. She scornfully looked him up and down. At that moment she looked very picturesque with her black skirt turned up from the bottom and pinned about her waist, displaying an expanse of light-blue petticoat. Her blouse was a simple thing in spotless white cotton, with a black ribbon tied about her neck.

"I think you are very ungrateful, Hervey," she said quietly. "I've only been home for a few months, and not

a day has passed but what I've heard you grumble about something in connection with your home. If it isn't the dulness it's the work; if it isn't the work it's your position of dependence, or the distance from town, or the people around us. Now you grumble because of the shooting. What do you want? We've got a section and a half, nearly a thousand acres, under wheat; we've got everything that money can buy in the way of improvements in machinery; we've got a home that might fill many a town-bred man with envy, and a mother who denies us nothing; and yet you aren't satisfied. What *do* you want? If things aren't what you like, for goodness' sake go back to the wilds again, where, according to your own account, you were happy. Your incessant grumbling makes me sick."

"A new departure, sister, eh?" Hervey retorted, smiling unpleasantly. "I always thought it was everybody's privilege to grumble a bit. Still, I don't think it's for you to start lecturing me if even it isn't. Mother's treated me pretty well—in a way. But don't forget she's only hired me the same as she's hired Andy, or any of the rest of the hands. Why, I haven't even the same position as you have. I am paid so many dollars a month, for which I have to do certain work. Let me tell you this, my girl: if I had stayed on this farm until father died my position would have been very different. It would all have been mine now."

"Well, since you didn't do so, the farm is mother's." Prudence's pale cheeks had become flushed with anger. "And I think, all things considered, she has treated you particularly well."

And she turned back to her work.

The girl was very angry, and justifiably so. Hervey was lazy. The work which was his was rarely done unless it happened to fall in with his plans for the moment. He was thoroughly bearish to both his mother and herself, and he had already overdrawn the allowance the former had made him. All this had become very evident to the girl since her return to the farm, and it cut her to the quick that the peace of her home should have been so rudely broken. Even Prudence's personal troubles were quite secondary to the steady grind of Hervey's ill-manners.

Curiously enough, after the first passing of the shock

of Grey's death she found herself less stricken than she would have deemed it possible. There could be no doubt that she had loved the man in her girlish, adoring fashion.

She had thought that never again could she return to the place which had such dread memories for her. Thoughts of the long summer days, and the dreary, interminable winter, when the distractions of labour are denied the farmer, had been revolting to her. To live within a few miles of where that dreadful tragedy had occurred; to live amongst the surroundings which must ever be reminding her of her dead lover; these things had made her shrink from the thought of the time when she would again turn westward to her home.

But when she had once more taken her place in the daily life at the farm, it was, at first with a certain feeling of self-disgust, and later with thankfulness, that she learned that she could face her old life with perfect equanimity. The childish passion for her dead lover had died; the shock which had suddenly brought about her own translation from girlhood to womanhood had also dispelled the illusions of her girlish first love.

She confided nothing to anybody, but just went about her daily round of labours in a quiet, pensive way, striving by every means to lighten her mother's burden and to help her brother to the path which their father before them had so diligently trodden.

Her patience had now given way under the wearing tide of Hervey's dissatisfaction, and it seemed as though a rupture between them were imminent.

"Oh, well enough, if you consider bare duty," Hervey retorted after a deliberate pause.

"Bare duty, indeed!" Prudence's two brown eyes flashed round on him in an instant. "You are the sort of man who should speak of duty, Hervey. You just ought to be ashamed of yourself. Your mother's debt of duty towards you was fulfilled on the day you left the farm years ago. She provided you with liberal capital to start you in life. Now you have come back, and she welcomes you with open arms—we both do—glad that you should be with us again. And what return have you made to her for her goodness? I'll tell you; you have brought her nothing but days of unhappiness with your lazy, grumbling ways. If you are going to continue like

this, for goodness' sake go away again. She has enough on her shoulders without being worried by you."

The man looked for a moment as though he were going to give expression to some very nasty talk. Prudence had returned to her pans and so lost the evil glance of his expressive eyes. Then his look changed to a mocking smile, and when he spoke his words were decidedly conciliating.

"I'm afraid I've done something to offend you, Prue. But you shouldn't use hard words like that. I know I'm not much of a farmer, and I am always a bit irritable when I am not my own master. But don't let's quarrel. I wanted to talk to you about George Iredale. He seems a jolly decent fellow—much too good to be kicking his heels about in such a district as Owl Hoot. He's extremely wealthy, isn't he?"

The girl felt angry still, but Hervey's tone slightly mollified her. She answered shortly enough, and the skimming of the milk was not done with the adeptness which she usually displayed.

"Rich? Yes, he's one of the richest men in Manitoba. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. He seems very interested in—us. He's always over here. And he never by any chance loses an opportunity of ingratiating himself with mother. I wonder what his object is?"

Prudence bent over her work to hide the tell-tale flush which had spread over her face, and the skimming was once more done with the utmost care.

"Mother is very fond of Mr. Iredale," she replied slowly. "He is a good man, and a good friend. We, as you know, are his nearest neighbours. Are you going over there to-day?"

"I think so. Why?"

"Oh—it doesn't matter—I was going to ask you to ride over to Lakeville to ask Alice Gordon to come here during the harvesting. She's staying with the Covills. But it doesn't matter in the least, I can send one of the boys."

"Yes, better send one of the boys. I'm going over to Lonely Ranch. I shall cultivate Iredale; he's the only man I care about round here."

Prudence had nearly completed her operations and was salting the cream in the pail.

"Say, sis, did it ever strike you that Iredale's dead sweet on you?" Hervey went on coarsely.

The girl suddenly turned and looked her brother squarely in the face. Her brow was again flushed, but now with anger.

"You'll lose the best of your shooting if you don't hurry. You've got ten miles to ride. And—I am going to lock up."

Her brother didn't offer to move.

"Why do you do all this work?" he went on calmly. "Why don't you send all the milk to the Government creamery? It'll save labour, and you get market price for the produce."

"Because Government creameries are for those who can't afford to send their stuff to market, or make their cheese on their farms."

"Ah, that's the worst of being large farmers, it entails so much work. By Jove! Iredale doesn't work like we 'moss-backs' have to, and he's made a fortune. I guess if there were a Mrs. George Iredale she'd have a bully time. No cheese or butter-making, eh, sis?" And, with a grin, Hervey turned on his heel, and, passing up the steps, walked away towards the barn.

Prudence waited until her brother had disappeared within the stables; then she locked up. As she turned from the door she heard her mother's voice calling.

"Girl—girl, where are you?"

"Here I am, mother dear, at the creamery."

Mrs. Malling trundled round the corner of the house.

"Prudence, there's young Peter Furrer come over, and I haven't time to stop and gossip with him. Like as not he don't want to talk to a body like me, anyway. Just drop that skirt o' yours, girl, and go and see him. A nice time o' day to come a-courtin'. He'll be a-follerin' you to the grain fields when we're harvesting."

Prudence smiled.

"Never mind, mother. He's come at an opportune moment. I want a messenger to go over to Lakeville. He'll do. I'm sending word to Alice Gordon. I want her to come here for the harvesting. Alice must get very sick of living at Ainsley, in spite of the fact of her beau living there. I've a good mind to tell her to bring him out here. Shan't be long, dear; I'll join you directly. Where are you? In the wash-house?"

The girl ran off, letting her skirt fall as she went. The mother passed on to the wash-house, muttering to herself as she went.

"La, if he were only like her. But there, the Lord ordains, and them as brings their offspring into the world must abide the racket. But it goes hard with a man about the house who idles. Mussy-a-me, he ain't like his poor father. And I'm not goin' to give him no extra dollars to fling around in Winnipeg. He's too fond of loose company."

The old lady continued to mutter audibly until she reached the wash-house door, where she disappeared just as the object of her thoughts led his horse out of the barn, jumped on its back, and rode away.

It was noon when Hervey reached Owl Hoot. He had been there several times lately, sometimes at George Iredale's invitation, but generally at his own. He had his own particular reasons for cultivating the owner of Lonely Ranch and those reasons he kept carefully to himself. This unworthy son had only been at Loon Dyke Farm for little more than four months, and during that brief period he had plainly shown what manner of man he was. Even the doting affection of his mother had not blinded that simple soul to his shortcomings. Each month since his coming he had steadily overdrawn his allowance to no inconsiderable extent. His frequent visits to Winnipeg had always ended in his return home with pockets empty, and an accumulation of debts, of which he said nothing, left behind him. Then came the inevitable request for money, generally backed up by some plausible excuse, and Hephzibah's cheque-book was always forthcoming on these occasions. But though, hitherto, she had not failed him, he saw by her manner that the time was not far distant when her sweet old face would become curiously set, and the comely mouth would shut tight, and the cheque-book would remain locked in her wardrobe, while he poured his flimsy excuses on stone-deaf ears.

He understood his mother. She would do much, perhaps far too much for her children, but she would not allow herself to be preyed upon; she was too keen a business woman for that. Besides, his accumulation of debts was now so great that all he was able to bleed her for would

be but a drop in the ocean. In Winnipeg he posed as the owner of Loon Dyke Farm, and as such his credit was extensive. But now there were clamourings for settlements, and Hervey knew that gaming debts and hotel bills must be met in due course. Tradesmen can wait, they have redress from owners of property, but the others have no such means of repaying themselves, therefore they must be paid if he wished to remain in the district. Now he meant to raise what he required from Iredale. He had recognized the fact that Iredale was in love with Prudence, nor was he slow to appreciate the possibilities which this matter suggested as a money-raising means. Yes, Hervey intended that Iredale should pay for the privilege of enjoying his sister's society. Money he must have, and that at once.

It was a wild, desolate region which he rode through on his way to Lonely Ranch. No one, finding themselves suddenly dropped into the midst of those wood-covered crags and clean-cut ravines, the boulder-strewn, grassless land, would have dreamed that they were within half-a-dozen miles of the fertile prairie-lands of Canada. It was like a slum hidden away in the heart of a fashionable city. The country round the mysterious Lake of the Woods is something utterly apart from the rest of the Canadian world, and partakes much of the nature of the Badlands of Dakota. It is tucked away in the extreme south-eastern corner of Manitoba, and the international boundary runs right through the heart of it.

Lonely Ranch was situated in an abrupt hollow, and was entirely lost to view in a mammoth growth of pine-woods. Years ago a settlement had existed in this region, but what the nature of that settlement it was now impossible to tell. Local tradition held that, at some far distant period, the place had been occupied by a camp of half-breed " bad-men " who worked their evil trade upon the south side of the American border, and sought security in the shelter of this perfect hiding-place. Be that as it may, it was now the abode of George Iredale, rancher. He had built for himself a splendid house of hewn logs, and his outbuildings—many of them the restored houses of the early settlers—and corrals formed a ranch of very large dimensions.

And it was all hidden away in black woods which defied the keenest observation of the passer-by. And the hollow was approached by a circuitous road which entered the cutting at its northern end. Any other mode of ingress was impossible for any beast of burden.

As Hervey entered the valley and became lost to view in the sombre woods, he was greeted by the woeful cry of a screech-owl. So sudden and unexpected was the ear-piercing cry that both horse and rider started. The horse threw up its head and snorted, and stood for an instant trembling with apprehension. Hervey looked about him keenly. He could see nothing but the crowd of leafless tree-trunks, and a bed of dry pine-cones which covered the surrounding earth. The owl was probably hidden in the hollow of some dead tree, for there were many about. He pressed his horse forward. The animal moved cautiously, dancing along in its nervous apprehension.

Presently another cry split the air. Again some owl had protested at his intrusion.

So suddenly did the cry come that Hervey felt a slight superstitious quiver pass down his back, but he rode on. He had nearly a mile of the valley to travel before he came to the house, and, during the journey, seven times came the hideous screech of the owls. Now he began to understand why this place was called " Owl Hoot."

It was with a feeling of relief that he at length saw the ranch through the trees, and he greeted Iredale, who was standing in his doorway when he dismounted, with genuine pleasure.

" Well," he said, after shaking his host by the hand, " another mile of this d—d valley and I should have turned tail and fled back to the open. Why, you must have a regular colony of owls in the place. Man, I never heard such weird cries in my life. How is it that I haven't heard them before when I came here ? "

Iredale took his visitor's horse. He was dressed in moleskin. Underneath his loose, dun-coloured vest he wore a soft shirt, and in place of a linen collar he had a red bandana tied about his neck. His head-gear was a Stetson hat. In this garb he looked much more burly and powerful than in the tweeds he usually wore when visiting at the farm. His strong, patient face was lit by a quiet smile. He was a man whose eyes, and the

expression of his features, never betrayed his thoughts. A keen observer would have noticed this at once, but to such people as he encountered he merely appeared a kindly man who was not much given to talking.

"Colony of owls, eh?" he said, leading the horse in the direction of the barn. "Those cries you have heard are what this cheerful place takes its name from. It only needs one cry to set the whole valley ringing with them. Had not the first creature seen you approach you might have reached your destination without hearing one disturbing sound. As a rule, in the daytime, they are not heard, but at night no one can enter these woods without the echoes being aroused. When they begin to shriek there is no sleep for any one in my house."

"So I should say. Well, never mind them now, we have other matters on hand. What coverts are we going to shoot over first?"

Hervey had followed his host to the stable. A strange-looking little creature came from the obscurity within. He was an undersized man with a small face, which seemed somehow to have shrivelled up like a dead leaf. He had a pair of the smallest eyes Hervey had ever seen, and not a vestige of hair on his face. His head was covered with a crown of bristly grey hair that seemed to grow in patches, and his feet were both turned in one direction—to the right.

"Take this plug and give him a rub down, Chintz," said Iredale. "When he's cool, water and feed him. Mr. Malling won't need him until about eight o'clock."

Then he turned towards the house.

"He don't waste words," observed Hervey, indicating the man, who had silently disappeared into the stable, taking the horse with him.

"No; he's dumb," replied Iredale. "He's my head boy."

"Boy?"

"Yes. Sixty-two."

The two men passed into Iredale's sitting-room. It was plainly but comfortably furnished in a typical bachelor manner. There were more signs of the owner's sporting propensities in the room than anything else, the walls being arranged with gun-racks, fishing-tackle, and trophies of the chase.

"We'll draw the bush on the other side of the Front Hill, otherwise known as the 'Haunted Hill,'" said Iredale, pointing to a gun-rack. "Select your weapon. I should take a mixed bore—ten and twelve. We may need both. There are some geese in a swamp over that way. The cartridges are in the book-case; help yourself to a good supply, and one of those haversacks."

Hervey did as his host suggested.

"Why 'Haunted Hill'?" he asked curiously.

Iredale shrugged.

"By reason of a little graveyard on the side of it. Evidently where the early settlers buried their dead. It is a local name given, I suppose, by the prairie folk of your neighbourhood. Come on."

The two men set out. Nor did they return until six o'clock. Their shoot was productive of a splendid bag—prairie chicken and geese. Both men were excellent shots. Iredale was perhaps the better of the two, at least his bag numbered two brace more than that of his companion; but then, as Hervey told himself, he was using a strange gun, whilst Iredale was using the weapon he most favoured. Supper was prepared by the time they returned to the house. Iredale, healthily hungry and calmly contented, sat down to the meal; Hervey, famished by his unusual exercise, joined him in the loudest of good spirits.

Towards the close of the meal, when the whisky-and-water Hervey had liberally primed himself with had had due effect, he broached the subject that was ever uppermost in his thoughts. He began expansively—

"You know, George,"—he had already adopted the familiarity, and Iredale had not troubled to show disapproval, probably he remembered the relationship between this man and Prudence,—"I'm sick of farming. It's too monotonous. Not only that; so long as mother lives I am little better than a hired man. Of course she's very good," he went on, as he noted a sudden lowering of his companion's eyelids; "does no end for me, and all that sort of thing; but my salary goes nowhere with a man who has—well—who has hitherto had considerable resources. It's no easy thing under the circumstances to keep my expenses down. It seems such nonsense, when one comes to think of it, that I, who will eventually own

the farm, subject, of course, to some provision for Prue, have to put up with a trifling allowance doled out to me every month; it's really monstrous. Who ever heard of a fellow living on one hundred dollars a month! That's what I'm getting. Why, I owe more than five months' wages at the Northern Union Hotel in Winnipeg. It can't be done; that's all about it."

Iredale looked over at the dark face opposite him. Nor could he help drawing a comparison between the man and the two ladies who owned him, one as brother, the other as son. How utterly unlike them he was in every way. There was not the smallest resemblance in mind, face, or figure. His thoughts reverted to Silas Malling, and here they paused. Here was the resemblance of outward form; and he wondered what unfathomed depths had lain in the nature of the old farmer which could have communicated themselves in such developed form to the son. It was inconceivable that this indolent, selfish spendthrift could have inherited his nature from Silas Malling. No; he felt sure that some former ancestor must have been responsible for it. He understood the drift of Hervey's words in a twinkling. He had experienced this sort of thing before from other men. Now he did not discourage it.

"A hundred a month on the prairie should be a princely —er—wage," he said in his grave way. "Of course it might be different in a city."

"It is," said Hervey decidedly. "I don't know, I'm sure," he went on, after a moment's pause. "I suppose I must weather through somehow."

He looked across at Iredale in such a definitely meaning way that the latter had no hesitation in speaking plainly. He knew it was money, and this was Prudence's brother.

"Got into a—mess?" he suggested encouragingly.

Hervey felt that he had an easy victim, but he smoked pensively for a moment before he spoke, keeping his great eyes turned well down upon the table-cover.

"Um—I lost a lot of money at poker the last time I was in the city. I was in an awful streak of bad luck; could do nothing right. Generally it's the other way about. Now they're pressing me to redeem the I.O.U.s. When they owe me I notice they're not so eager about it."

"That's bad; I'm sorry to hear it." Iredale's eyes

were smiling, whilst in their depths there was the faintest suspicion of irony. He was in no way imposed upon by the breadth of the fabrication. It was the old story. He, too, lit his pipe and leant back in his chair. "I hope the amount is not too overwhelming. If I can—er—be——"

Hervey interrupted him eagerly. He brought his hand down heavily upon the table.

"By Jove! you are a good sort, George. If you could—just a loan, of course—you see I can offer you security on my certain inheritance of the farm——"

But Iredale had no wish to hear anything about his future possibilities of inheritance. He interrupted him sharply, and his tone was unusually icy.

"Tut—tut, man. Never mind about that. In spite of your need of money, I hope it will be many a year before your mother leaves our farming world."

"I trust so," murmured Hervey, without enthusiasm.

"How much will appease your creditors?"

Iredale spoke with such indifference about the amount that Hervey promptly decided to double the sum he originally intended to ask for.

"Five thousand dollars," he said, with some show of diffidence, but with eyes that gazed hungrily towards this man who treated the loaning of a large amount in such a careless manner.

Iredale offered no comment. He merely rose from his seat, and opening a drawer in his bookcase, produced a cheque-book and a pen and ink. He made out a cheque for the amount named, and passed it across the table. His only remark was—

"Your luck may change. Pay me when you like. No, don't bother about a receipt."

Hervey seized upon the piece of paper. He was almost too staggered to tender his thanks. Iredale in his quiet way was watching, nor was any movement on his companion's part lost to his observant eyes. He had "sized" this man up, from the soles of his boots to the crown of his head, and his contempt for him was profound. But he gave no sign. His cordiality was apparently perfect. The five thousand dollars were nothing to him, and he felt that the giving of that cheque might save those at

Loon Dyke Farm from a world of anxiety and trouble. Somehow behind that impassive face he may have had some thoughts of the coming of a future time when he would be able to deal with this man's mode of life with that firmness which only relationship could entitle him to—when he could personally relieve Hephzibah of the responsibility and wearing anxiety of her worthless son's doings. In the meantime, like the seafaring man, he would just "stand by."

"I can't thank you enough, George," said Hervey at last. "You have got me out of an awkward situation. If I can do you a good turn, I will." Iredale detected a meaning emphasis in the last remark which he resented. "Some day," the man went on; "but there—I will say no more."

"No, I shouldn't say anything. These things happen in the course of a lifetime, and one mustn't say too much about them." The two men then smoked on in silence.

Presently Hervey rose to go. It was nearly eight o'clock.

"Well," said Iredale, as he prepared to bid his guest good-bye, "we have had a good afternoon's sport. Now you know my coverts you must come over again. Come whenever you like. If I am unable to go with you, you are welcome to shoot over the land by yourself. There are some grand antelope about the place."

"Thanks. I shall certainly come again. And—well, when are you coming over to us again? I can't offer you any shooting."

"Don't trouble," smiled Iredale.

Hervey saw the "boy" Chintz leading his horse round.

"You might tell your mother," the rancher went on, "that I'll come to-morrow to read over that fencing contract she spoke about for her."

Hervey leered round upon him.

"Will it do if I tell Prue instead?"

"Certainly not." Iredale's face was quite expressionless at that moment. "You will please do as I ask."

Hervey gulped down his chagrin; but his eyes were alight with the anger from which his lips refrained. He mounted his horse.

"Well, good-bye, George," he said, with a great display

of cordiality. "I hope those owls of yours will permit me to ride in peace."

"I have no doubt they will," replied Iredale with an inscrutable smile. "Good-bye."

Hervey rode away. The man he had left remained standing at his front door. The horseman half turned in his saddle as the bush closed about him.

"Curse the man for his d——d superiority," he muttered. "I suppose he thinks I am blind. Well, Mr. Iredale, we've made a pleasant start from my point of view. If you intend to marry Prudence you'll have to pay the piper. Guess I'm that piper. It's money I want, and it's money you'll have to pay."

The mysterious owner of Lonely Ranch was thinking deeply as he watched his guest depart.

"I believe he's the greatest scoundrel I have ever come across," he said to himself. "Money? Why, he'd sell his soul for it, or I'm no judge of men of his kidney, and, worse luck, I know his sort well enough. I wonder what made me do it? Not friendship. Prudence? No, not exactly. And yet—I don't know. I think I'd sooner have him on my side than against me." Then he turned his eyes towards the corrals and outbuildings which were dotted about amongst the trees, and finally they settled upon a little clearing on the side of Front Hill. It was a graveyard of the early settlers. "Yes, I must break away from it all—and as soon as possible. I have said so for many a year, but the fascination of it has held me. If I hope to ever marry Prudence I must give it up. I must not—dare not let her discover the truth. The child's goodness drives me to desperation. Yes—it shall all go."

His gaze wandered in the direction Hervey had taken, and a troubled look came into his calm eyes. A moment later he turned suddenly with a shiver and passed into the house. Somehow his thoughts were very gloomy.

CHAPTER X

THE GRAVEYARD AT OWL HOOT

PRUDENCE and Alice Gordon surveyed the wild scene that suddenly opened out before them. They had drawn their horses up to a standstill on the brow of no inconsiderable hill, and beyond stretched a panorama of strikingly impressive beauty. Nature in one of her wildest moments, verdant and profound, was revealed.

Alice was a pretty girl, rather ordinary, and ever ready for laughter, which helped to conceal an undercurrent of serious thought. She was an old pupil of Sarah Gurridge's, and consequently Prudence's school-friend. But Alice lived in Ainsley, where, report had it, she was "keeping company" with Robb Chillingwood, and now the two girls only met when Alice visited the farm at such seasons of the year as the present.

"Do you think it will be safe to go further?" asked Alice, in a tone of awestruck amazement. "You say you are sure of the way. Would it not be better to turn off here and make for Lonely Ranch, and seek Chintz's guidance? There is time enough, and it is so easy to get lost."

The girls had set out to visit Lonely Ranch, to enjoy a ramble and a sort of picnic in the surrounding woods. Iredale was away on business, and the two friends, availing themselves of the opportunity, were taking a day off from the duties of the farm. They had started with the intention of riding over and leaving their horses with Iredale's man, Chintz, and then proceeding on foot. At the last moment Prudence had changed her mind and decided on a visit to the great Lake of the Woods, which was two miles further on to the south-west of the ranch. They carried their provisions in their saddle-bags, and

had made up their minds to find some suitable break in the woods on the shore of the lake where they could tether their horses and idle the afternoon away.

Instead of turning into the valley of Owl Hoot they had crossed the mouth of it, and were now at the summit of its eastern slope, gazing out upon the mysteries of the almost uninhabited regions beyond.

"Of course it's safe, you silly," said Prudence. "Why, suppose we were to lose ourselves, that old mare you are riding would take you home straight as the crow flies. Besides, I have no fancy for that ferret-faced Chintz becoming one of our party. We could never talk freely in front of him."

"All right, then," said Alice, with a sigh. "You are leader of this expedition. Don't the woods look gloomy? And look out beyond. There seems to be no end to them. Shall we stop and have dinner here, and ride on afterwards?"

"Certainly not, madam," Prudence said briskly. "No shirking; besides, we want water to make our tea. There's none here."

Prudence understood her friend's fears, which were not without reason. It was a simple thing to get lost in such a forest. But anyway, as she had said, the old prairie horses they were riding would carry them home should they mistake the road. There was really no danger.

It was a gorgeous day. The sun was shining with unabated splendour; as yet it wanted an hour to noon. The brilliant daylight was somehow different here to what it was on the prairie. The fierce sunlight poured down upon an unbroken carpet of dull green, which seemed to have in it a tinge of the blackness of the heavy tree-trunks which it concealed beneath. The result was curiously striking. The brightness of the day was dulled, and the earth seemed bathed in a peculiar light such as a vault of grey rain-clouds above it bestows. The girls, gazing into the valley which yawned at their feet, were looking into a shadowed hollow of sombre melancholy—unchanging, unrelieved.

Beyond stretched a vista of hills, growing steadily greater as the hazy distance was reached. Behind where

they stood was the Owl Hoot valley and woodlands, equally sombre, until the prairie was reached.

The moments passed, and they made no effort to move. They were both lost in thought, and looked out across the wild woodlands with eyes which beheld only that which was most profoundly beautiful. Prudence was enjoying the scene, the redolent air which rose from the woods below, the solitary grandeur of the world about her, with all the appreciation of a prairie-bred girl. Alice merely saw and marvelled at the picture before her. She was less enthusiastic, less used to such surroundings than her companion. They affected her differently. She marvelled, she wondered, but a peculiar nervousness was inspired by what she beheld. At length Prudence took the initiative. She lifted her reins and her horse moved forward.

"Come along, Alice," she said. And the two disappeared down the slope into the giant forest below.

Once on their way Alice recovered her good spirits again. Within the forest the world did not seem so vast, so confusing to the eye. On either hand, ahead, were to be seen only bare tree-trunks beneath the ponderous green canopy which shut out the sunlight from above. The scrunch of the pine-cones crushing under the hoofs of the horses carried a welcome sense of companionship to the riders. Alice found the reality much less fearful than the contemplation from the heights above. In a few moments both girls were chatting gaily, all thoughts of losing themselves, or of other dangers which these virgin forests might conceal, having passed from their minds.

Whatever doubts may have assailed Alice they were soon set at rest, for, in a short time, after ascending another rather sharp slope, they found themselves gazing down upon a long, narrow sheet of water. It was one of the many inlets with which the shores of the mysterious Lake of the Woods abound. From where the girls first caught sight of it, it looked as though the forest had been cleanly rent by the glistening water which had cut its way into the dense growth, demolishing every sign of vegetation in its path, but leaving everything which grew even down to its very edge. This inlet widened out between two hills, and, beyond that, in a dazzling haze, the vast body

of the lake, like a distant view of the sea, was just visible. It was a perfect picture.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" said Prudence enthusiastically. "Isn't it worth a few miles' ride to see it? I'm glad we didn't go and bother that horried little Chintz. It would have taken half the pleasure away to have had his ferrety face with us."

"Lovely—lovely," exclaimed Alice rapturously. Her bright eyes were dancing with delight, and her breath came and went rapidly. "Just fancy, Prue; I have lived all these years within reach of this place and this is the first time I have ever set eyes upon the lake."

Her companion laughed.

"That is not to be wondered at. There are very few people who ever come this way. Why, I couldn't say, unless it is that the country is bad to travel through on this side. Mind, although there are few habitations on the western shore, there are plenty to the east and south. I never could understand why George Iredale selected Owl Hoot for the site of his ranch. Just think how delightful it would be to have your home built on this hill." The girl indicated their position with her riding-whip. "Wouldn't it be delightful to wake each morning and gaze out upon such a scene?"

"Perfect," said Alice, whilst her eyes glanced mischievously in her friend's direction. "Summer or winter?"

"Summer, of course, you goose," exclaimed Prudence.

"Of course; winter would be different, wouldn't it?" Alice was laughing, but Prudence was quite serious.

"Yes; that's the worst of all Nature's finest handiwork. There's always some drawback to it. Ugh, winter in this place would be too dreadful to contemplate. These wilds are only fit for Indians and coyotes and wolves when the summer is over."

"But it's a heavenly spot now," said Alice. Suddenly she raised her whip and pointed. Far down, out upon the surface of the silvery belt of water, a tiny speck was slowly moving. At first so distant was it that it appeared to be stationary, but after a while it was distinctly to be seen moving. "What is it?" she questioned sharply.

"Looks like a boat," replied Prudence. "I wonder whose?"

"I give it up. Does Mr. Iredale keep a boat?"

Although Prudence was the elder of the two girls she was much the simpler. She was essentially of the prairie. She had no suspicion of the apparently innocent inquiry.

"I don't think so. I never really heard. No; I should think that must belong to some Indians or half-breed fishermen. There are some of those people about, I believe."

She continued to watch the boat for some moments. The less serious girl beside her allowed her attention to wander. Prudence saw the boat approach the near shore. Then it disappeared under the shadow of the towering pines. An exclamation from Alice drew her attention.

"Look over the other side, Prue; there's another boat. It has just shot out from that great clump of undergrowth. Why, there are a dozen people in it. Look! they are racing along. Where's the other gone?"

"It disappeared under this bank. Ah, the other one is following in its wake. Yes, I should say those are Indians."

"Let us go on down. We can see better from the bank. My curiosity is aroused. I didn't know there was so much fishing done here. Mr. Iredale never speaks of it."

"I don't think Mr. Iredale sees much of the lake. His land—that is, his grazing—lies to the west of the house. But he rarely talks about his work. As he says, so few people care about this wild district that he does not like to worry folks by reminding them of its existence."

"All the same," replied Alice, "one of these fine days some enterprising American will come along and find out some, at present, unknown wealth in the place, and then the settlers round the district will kick themselves. Trust a Canuk for sitting down on his hundred and sixty acres and never moving beyond the limits of his fencing. I like this weird place, with its woods, its hills and valleys, its lakes and its mysterious boats. You should draw George—I mean Mr. Iredale—out. There must be a deal that is of interest here."

"Why should I draw him out?" asked Prudence innocently, as the horses ambled down the hill towards the shore of the lake. "You ask him. I believe he'd like to tell some one all about it."

"No, thanks, friend Prue," said Alice cheerfully. "I'm not what you might call a 'free agent.' There is a young man, to wit, a certain Robb, who might object. Besides, I have not turned poacher yet."

"What on earth do you mean?"

Prudence turned a pair of astonished brown eyes on her companion. Alice didn't answer, and the two looked squarely into each other's faces. The elder girl read the meaning which Alice did not attempt to conceal, and a warm flush mounted quickly and suffused her sun-tanned face.

Then followed a long silence, and the crackling of the pine-cones beneath the horses' feet alone aroused the echoes of the woods. Prudence was thinking deeply. A thoughtful pucker marred the perfect arch of her brows, and her half-veiled eyes were turned upon her horse's mane.

George Iredale. What of him? He seemed so to have grown into her life of late that she would now scarcely recognize Loon Dyke Farm without him. This sudden reminder made her look back over the days since her return from "down East," and she realized that George, since that time, had literally formed part of her life. He was always in her thoughts in some way or other. Every one on the farm spoke of him as if he belonged to it. Hardly a day passed but what some portion of it was spent by him in her company. His absence was only when his business took him elsewhere.

And what was the meaning of it all? What was he to her that her friend should talk of "poaching" when regarding her own intercourse with this man? Prudence's face grew hotter. The awakening had come. At that moment she knew that George Iredale was a good deal to her, and she felt a certain maidenly shame at the discovery. He had never uttered a word of love to her—not one, in all the years she had known him, and, unbidden, she had given him her love. In those first moments of realization her heart was filled with something like dismay which was not wholly without a feeling of joy. She felt herself flushing under the thoughts conjured by her friend's implication, and her feelings became worse as Alice went on.

"Ah, Prue, you can't hide these things from me. I have always intended to say something, but you are such an austere person that I was afraid of getting a snub. Mr. Iredale is a charming man, and—well—I hope when it comes off you'll be very, very happy."

"Don't be absurd, Alice." Prudence had recovered herself now.

"My dear Prue," the girl retorted emphatically, and imitating the other's lofty tone, "George Iredale just worships the ground you walk on. One word of encouragement from you, if you haven't already given it to him, and in a short time you will be the mistress of Lonely Ranch."

"Nothing of the sort."

"My dear girl, I know."

"You know less than you think you do, and I am not going to listen to any more of your nonsense."

Prudence touched her horse's flank with her heel and trotted on ahead of her companion. But in her heart she knew that what Alice had said was true.

Alice called after her to wait. The trees were so closely set that she had difficulty in steering clear of them; but Prudence was obdurate and kept right on. Nor did she draw rein until the shore of the lake was reached, and then only did she do so because of the impassable tangle of undergrowth which confronted her. Just as Alice came up with her she started off again at right angles to the direction they had come, riding parallel with the bank. Alice, breathless and laughing, followed in her wake, until at length a break in the trees showed them a grassy patch which sank slowly down in a gentle declivity to the water's edge. By the time this was reached Prudence's good-humour was quite restored.

"A nice dance you've led me," expostulated Alice, as they dismounted and began to off-saddle.

"Serves you right for your impertinence," Prudence smiled over at the other.

"All the same I'm right."

"Now keep quiet, or I'll ride off again and leave you."

"So you can if you like; this old mare I'm riding will take me home straight as the crow flies. What's that?"

Out across the water came a long-drawn cry, so weird

yet so human that the two girls stood still as statues, their faces blanching under their tan. The echoes seemed to die hard, growing slowly fainter and fainter. Alice's eyes were widely staring and filled with an expression of horror. Prudence recovered herself first. She laughed a little constrainedly, however.

"We are in the region of Owl Hoot," she said significantly. "That was one of the screech-owls."

"O-oh! I thought it was some one being murdered."

"We shall probably hear lots of strange cries; these regions are renowned for them. You've got the kettle on your saddle, Al. Get all the things out whilst I gather some kindling and make a fire."

"For goodness' sake don't leave me here alone for long," Alice entreated. "I won't mention George's name again, sure."

But Prudence had tethered her horse and set off on her quest. Alice, left alone, secured her horse and proceeded to disgorge the contents of her saddle-bags, and also those on her friend's saddle. This done, she stepped down to the water's edge, and, pushing the reedy vegetation on one side, filled the kettle. As she rose from her task she looked out down the wide inlet. The view was an enchanting one. The wooded banks opposite her rose abruptly from the water, overshadowing it, and throwing a black reflection upon its still surface. There was not a breath of air stirring; the world seemed wondrously still.

Away to the left the water widened out, and was overhung by a haze of heat. She was about to turn away when, from out of the distance, there appeared another long boat. Instantly the girl was all attention. This boat was not travelling in the same direction as were those they had first seen, but was making for the point where the others had appeared. She had a much better view down here at the bank of anything moving on the lake than from the higher land, and she could not help being struck by the fact that, whoever the occupants of the strange craft, they were not Indians. One man was standing in the stern steering the boat by the aid of a long paddle, and this man was garbed in white man's attire. The distance she was away from the object of her curiosity prevented her distinguishing the features of these people

of the lake; but that which was apparent to her was the fact that they were not fishermen, nor was their boat a fishing-boat. It was long, and built with the narrowness of a rice-lake canoe, and so low in the water that its gunwale looked to be within an inch of the glassy surface.

So intent was the girl upon this strange appearance that she did not notice Prudence's return, and as the strange craft disappeared within the undergrowth of the opposite shore, she turned with a start at the sound of her friend's voice beside her.

"Another boat," asked Prudence, "or the one we saw before?"

"Another."

There was a silence; then the two turned away and prepared their dinner.

They pitched their camp in the shade, and the meal was quickly prepared. The smoke from their fire helped to keep off the few late summer mosquitoes that hummed drowsily upon the sultry air. Everything was wonderfully peaceful and sleepy about their little encampment. Not a leaf stirred or a bough creaked; there was the stillness of death over all. Gradually the silence communicated itself to the girls, and the pauses in their chatter grew longer and their eyes more thoughtful. Even their horses for the most part stood idly by. The green grass had but a passing attraction for them. They nibbled at it occasionally, it is true, but with apparently little appetite. After dinner the two friends spread their saddle-blankets upon the grass, and stretched themselves thereon in attitudes of comfort, from which they could look out across the shining surface of the lake; and soon their talk almost entirely ceased. Then, for a while, they lay dreaming the time away in happy waking dreams of the future.

Alice had bridged for a moment the miles which divided Owl Hoot from Ainsley, and her thoughts were with her sturdy lover, Robb Chillingwood. She was contemplating their future together, that future which would contain for them, if no great ease and luxury, at least the happiness of a perfect love and mutual assistance in times of trial. Her practical mind did not permit her to gaze on visionary times of prosperity and rises to position, but rather she

considered their present trifling income, and what they two could do with it. Now and again she sighed, not with any feeling of discontent, but merely at the thought of her own inability to augment her future husband's resources. She was in a serious mood, and pondered long upon these, to her, all-important things.

Prudence's thoughts were of a very different nature, although she too was dreaming of the man whom her sudden realization had brought so pronouncedly into her life. Her round dark face was clouded with a look of sore perplexity, and at first the dominant note of her reflections was her blindness to the real state of her own feelings. Now everything was clear to her of the manner in which George Iredale had steadily grown into her daily life, and how her own friendly liking for him had already ripened into something warmer. He was so quiet, so undemonstrative, so good and kind. She saw now how she had grown accustomed to look for and abide by his decisions in matters which required more consideration than she could give—matters which were beyond her. She understood the strong, reliant nature which underlaid the quiet exterior. And now, when she came to think of it, in all the days of her grown womanhood he had ever been near her, seeking her society always. There was just that brief period during which Leslie Grey had swayed her heart with his tempestuous manner, for the rest it was Iredale. She tried to shut him out; to contemplate his removal from the round of her daily life. Instantly the picture of that life lost its brightness and colouring, and her world appeared to her a very dreary smudge of endless toil. Yes, Alice had sounded the keynote, and Prudence's heart had responded with the chord in sympathy. She knew now that she loved George Iredale.

This realization was not wholly pleasurable, for with it came a sudden grip of fear at her simple heart. Her thoughts went back to some eight months before. And she found herself again looking into the death-chamber at the Leonville school-house. That scene had no longer power to move her; at least not in the way one might have expected. She no longer loved the dead man; he had passed from her thoughts as though she had never

cared for him. But a new feeling had sprung up in her heart which the realization of this indifference had brought. And this feeling filled her with an utter self-loathing. She shuddered as she thought of her own heartlessness, the shallow nature which was hers. She remembered her feelings at that bedside as she listened to the dying man's last words. Worst of all, she remembered how, in the paroxysm of her grief, she had sworn to discover the murderer of Leslie Grey and see justice administered. Now she asked herself, What had she done? And the answer came in all its callous significance —Nothing!

She roused herself; her face was very pale. Her thoughts framed themselves into unspoken words.

"If this is the way I have fulfilled my promise to the dead, if this is the extent and depth of my love, then I am the most worthless woman on earth. What surety can I give that my love for George is a better thing than was my affection for Leslie Grey?"

She sat herself up, she looked over at her companion and noted the drooping eyelids. Her features were strangely set, and her smooth forehead wore a disfiguring frown. Then she spoke in a sharp tone that startled the girl beside her.

"Alice, do you think it is possible to imagine you are in love with a man—I mean, that you honestly believe you love him at the time and really do not?"

Alice endeavoured to collect her wandering thoughts.

"Why, yes, I suppose so. I've been in love with a dozen men at one time and another, never longer than a month with any one of them. I never go to a dance but what I fall in love with at least two of my partners, and my undying affection for both just lasts the evening out. Imagination is strongly developed in some people—when they're young."

"No, be serious."

Alice gazed at the other curiously. Then—

"Out with it, Prue. What is it that's troubling you? Your face is significant of some dire tragedy."

"How long have you been engaged to Robb Chillingwood?"

"Nearly six months. Why?"

"And you've never thought of any other man?"

Alice shook her head. For once she was quite serious.

"Couldn't look at another man. Robb hasn't got two cents to his name, but I'm going to marry him or—or—die an old maid."

For a moment the expression of Prudence's face relaxed, but a moment later it set itself into more stern lines than ever.

"Alice, you were right in what you said about George," she went on slowly. "I can hardly believe it myself yet. Leslie Grey has only been dead eight months, and yet here I am thinking all day long of another man. I believe I am utterly heartless—worthless."

"Well?"

"Well, it's just this. I am not worth an honest man's love. I used to think I worshipped the ground poor Leslie walked on—I'm sure I loved him to distraction," the girl went on passionately. "Very well; suppose George asked me to marry him and I consented. In all probability, in the light of what has gone before, I should be tired of him in a year, and then—and then——"

"You're talking nonsense now, Prue," said Alice. She was alarmed at the other's tone. The beautiful face of her friend was quite pale, and sharp lines were drawn about the mouth.

"I'm not talking nonsense," the other went on in a tense, bitter tone. "What I say is true. In less than eight months I have forgotten the dead. I have done nothing to discover the murderer who robbed me of a husband and lover. I have simply forgotten—forgotten him. Put yourself in my place—put your Robb in Leslie's place. What would you have done?"

Alice thought seriously before she answered.

"I should never have rested until I had avenged his death," she said at last, and a hard glitter shone in her eyes. Then a moment after she smiled. "But it is different. I don't think you really loved Leslie Grey. You merely thought you did."

"That only makes it worse," the other retorted. Prudence's face was alight with inflexible resolve. "My debt to the dead must be paid. I see it now in a light in

which it has never presented itself to me before. I must prove myself to myself before—before——" She broke off, only to resume again with a fierce and passionate earnestness of which Alice had never believed her capable. "I can never marry George Iredale with Leslie's unavenged death upon my conscience. I could never trust myself. George may love me now; I believe I love him, but—— No, Alice, I will never marry him until my duty to Leslie Grey is fulfilled. This shall be my punishment for my heartless forgetfulness."

Alice surveyed her friend for some time without speaking. Then she burst out into a scathing protest—

"You are mad, Prue,—mad, mad, utterly mad. You would throw away a life's happiness for the mere shadow of what you are pleased to consider a duty. Worse, you would destroy a man's happiness for a morbid phantasm. What can you do towards avenging Leslie's death? You hold no clue. What the police have failed to fathom, how can you hope to unravel? If I were a man, do you know what I'd do to you? I'd take you by the shoulders and shake you until that foolish head of yours threatened to part company with your equally foolish body. You should have thought of these things before, and not now, when you realize how fond you are of George, set about wrecking two healthy lives. Oh, Prue, you are—are—a fool! And I can scarcely keep my temper with you." Alice paused for want of breath and lack of vocabulary for vituperation. Prudence was looking out across the water. Her expression was quite unchanged. With all the warped illogicalness of the feminine mind she had discovered the path in which she considered her duty to lie, and was resolved to follow it.

"I have a better clue than you suppose, Alice," she said thoughtfully, "the clue of his dying words. I understood his reference to the Winnipeg *Free Press*. That must be the means by which the murderer is discovered. They were not horse-thieves who did him to death. And I will tell you something else. The notice in that paper to which he referred—you know—is even now inserted at certain times. The man or men who cause that notice to be inserted in the paper were in some way responsible for his death."

There was a moment's pause. Then Alice spoke quite calmly.

"Tell me, Prue, has George proposed yet?"

"No."

"Ah!" And Alice smiled broadly and turned her eyes towards the setting sun. When she spoke again it was to draw attention to the time. As though by common consent the matter which had been under discussion was left in abeyance.

"It is time to be moving," the girl said. "See, the sun will be down in an hour. Let us have tea and then we'll saddle-up."

Tea was prepared, and by the time the sun dipped below the horizon the horses were re-saddled and all was ready for the return journey. They set out for home. Alice was in the cheeriest of spirits, but Prudence was preoccupied, even moody. That afternoon spent in the peaceful wilds of the "back" country had left its mark upon her. All her life—her world—seemed suddenly to have changed. It was as though this second coming of love to her had brought with it the banking clouds of an approaching storm. The two rode Indian fashion through the woods, and neither spoke for a long time; then, at last, it was Alice who ventured a protest.

"Where are you leading us to, Prue?" she asked. "I am sure this is not the way we came."

Prudence looked round; she seemed as though she had only just awakened from some unpleasant dream.

"Not the way?" she echoed. Then she drew her horse up sharply. She was alert in an instant. "I'm afraid you're right, Al." Then in a tone of perplexity, "Where are we?"

Alice stared at her companion with an expression of dismay.

"Oh, Prue, you've gone and lost us—and the sun is already down."

Prudence gazed about her blankly for a few moments, realizing only too well how truly her companion had spoken. She had not the vaguest notion of the way they had come. The forest was very dark. The day-long twilight which reigned beneath the green had darkened with the shadows of approaching night. There was no

opening in view anywhere; there was nothing but the world of tree-trunks, and, beneath their horses' feet, the soft carpet of rotting vegetation, whilst every moment the gloom was deepening to darkness—a darkness blacker than the blackest night.

"What shall we do?" asked Alice, in a tone of horror. Then: "Shall we go back?"

Prudence shook her head. Her prairie instincts were roused now.

"No; come along; give your mare her head. Our horses will find the way."

They touched the animals sharply, and, in response, they moved forward unhesitatingly. The old mare Alice was riding took the lead, and the journey was continued. The gloom of the forest communicated something of its depressing influence to the travellers. There was no longer any attempt at talk. Each was intent upon ascertaining their whereabouts and watching the alert movements of the horses' heads and ears. The darkness had closed in in the forest with alarming suddenness, and, in consequence, the progress was slow; but, in spite of this, the assurance with which the horses moved on brought confidence to the minds of the two girls. Prudence was in no way disturbed. Alice was not quite so calm. For an hour they threaded their way through the endless maze of trees. They had climbed hills and descended into valleys, but still no break in the dense foliage above. They had just emerged from one hollow, deeper and wider than the rest, and were slowly ascending a steep hill. Prudence was suddenly struck by an idea.

"Alice," she said, "I believe we are heading for the ranch. The valleys all run north and south hereabouts. We are travelling westwards."

"I hope so," replied the other decidedly; "we shall then be able to get on the right trail for home. This is jolly miserable. O—oh!"

The girl's exclamation was one of horror. A screech-owl had just sent its dreadful note in melancholy waves out upon the still night air. It started low, almost pianissimo, rose with a hideous crescendo to fortissimo, and then died away like the wail of a lost soul. It came from just ahead of them and to the right. Alice's horse

shied and danced nervously. Prudence's horse stood stock still. Then, as no further sound came, they started forward again.

"My, but those owls are dreadful things," said Alice. "I believe I nearly fainted."

"Come on," said Prudence. "After all they are only harmless owls." Her consolatory words were as much for the benefit of her own nerves as for those of her friend.

The brow of the hill was passed and they began to descend the other side. Suddenly they saw the twinkling of stars ahead. Alice first caught sight of the welcome clearing.

"An opening at last, Prue; now we shall find out where we are." A moment later she turned again. "A light," she said. "That must be the ranch. Quick, come along."

The blackness of the wood gave place to the starlit darkness of the night. They were about to pass out into the open when suddenly Alice's horse came to a frightened stand. For an instant the mare swerved, then she reared and turned back whence she had come. Prudence checked her horse and looked for what had frightened the other animal.

A sight so weird presented itself that she suddenly raised one hand to her face and covered her eyes in nervous terror. Alice had regained the mastery of her animal and now drew up alongside the other. She looked, and the sharp catching of her breath told of what she saw. Suddenly she gripped Prudence's arm and drew the girl's hand from before her face.

"Keep quiet, Prue," she whispered. "What is this place?"

"The Owl Hoot graveyard. This is the Haunted Hill."

"And those?" Alice was pointing fearfully towards the clearing.

"Are—— Oh, come away, I can't stand it."

But neither girl made a move to go. Their eyes were fixed in a gaze of burning fascination upon the scene before them. Dark, almost black, the surrounding woods threw up in relief the clearing lit by the stars. But even so the scene was indistinct and uncertain. A low broken

fence surrounded a small patch of ground, in the middle of which stood a ruined log-hut. Round the centre were scattered half-a-dozen or more tumbled wooden crosses, planted each in the centre of an elongated mound of earth. Here and there a slab of stone marked the grave of some dead-and-gone resident of Owl Hoot, and a few shrubs had sprung up as though to further indicate these obscure monuments. But it was not these things which had filled the spectators with such horror. It was the crowd of silent flitting figures that seemed to come from out of one of the stone-marked graves, and pass, in regular procession, in amongst the ruins of the log-hut, and there disappear. To the girls' distorted fancy they seemed to be shrouded human forms. Their faces were hidden by reason of their heads being bent forward under the pressure of some strange burden which rested on their shoulders. Forty of these gruesome phantoms rose from out of the ground and passed before their wildly-staring eyes and disappeared amidst the ruins. Not a sound was made by their swift-treading feet. They seemed to float over the ground. Then all became still again. Nothing moved nor was there even the rustle of a leaf upon the boughs above. The stars twinkled brightly, and the calm of the night was undisturbed. Alice's grip fell from her companion's arm. Her horse reared and plunged, then, taking the bit between its teeth, it set off down the hill in the direction of Iredale's house. The light which had burned in one of the windows had suddenly gone out, and there was nothing now to indicate the way, but the mare made no mistake. Prudence gave her horse its head and followed in hot pursuit.

Both animals came to a stand before the door of the barn behind the house, where, to the girls' joy, they found the ferret-faced Chintz apparently awaiting them.

Alice was almost in a fainting condition, but Prudence was more self-possessed. She merely told the little man that they had lost their way, and asked his assistance to guide them out of the valley to where the trail to Loon Dyke Farm began. Such was the unexpected ending of their picnic.

CHAPTER XI

CANINE VAGARIES

THE last stage of the girls' journey—the ride home from the ranch—was like some horrible nightmare. It was as though recollection had suddenly turned itself into a hideous, tangible form which was pursuing them over the dark expanse of prairie. Even their horses seemed to share something of their riders' fears, for their light springing stride never slackened during that ten miles' stretch, and they had to be literally forced down to a walk to give them the necessary "breathing." Like their riders, the animals' one idea seemed to be to reach the security of the farm with all possible dispatch.

The farm dogs heralded their approach, and when the girls slid down from their saddles Hephzibah was at the threshold waiting for them. The rest of the evening was spent in recounting their adventures. Hephzibah listened to their narrative, filled with superstitious emotion whilst endeavouring to treat the matter in what she deemed a practical, common-sense manner. She was profoundly impressed. Hervey was there, but chose to treat their story with uncompromising incredulity. So little was he interested, although he listened to what was said, as to rouse the indignation of both girls, and only his sudden departure to bed saved a stormy ending to the scene.

It was not until the house was locked up, and Prudence and Alice were preparing to retire—they shared the same bedroom—that Hephzibah Malling dropped her mask of common-sense and laid bare the quaintly superstitious side of her character. The good farm-wife had not lived on the prairie all her life without contracting to the full the superstitions which always come to those whose lives are

spent in such close communion with Nature. She could talk freely with these two girls when no one else was present. She had heard a hundred times the legends pertaining to the obscure valley of Owl Hoot, but this was the first time that she had heard the account of these things from eye-witnesses.

She came into the girls' bedroom arrayed in a red flannel dressing-gown, which had shrunk considerably under the stress of many washings, and her night-cap with its long strings, white as driven snow, enveloped her head like a miniature sun-bonnet. She came with an excuse upon her lips, and seated herself in a rigid rush-bottomed chair. Prudence was brushing her hair and Alice was already in bed.

"My dears," she said, as she plumped herself down; she was addressing them both, but her round eyes were turned upon Alice, who was sitting up in bed with her hands clasped about her knees, "I've been thinking that maybe we might ask young Mr. Chillingwood out here. It's quite a time since I've seen him. He used to come frequent-like before—before—" with a sharp glance over at her daughter, "a few months back. He's a good lad, and I thought as he'd make quite a companion for Hervey. An' it 'ud do 'em a deal of good to air them spare rooms. I'm sure they're smelling quite musty. What say?"

Alice blushed and Hephzibah's old eyes twinkled with pleasure. Prudence answered at once—

"That's a good idea, mother; I'll write to him at once for you." Then she turned her smiling face upon the old lady and shook a forefinger at her. "You're an arch-plotter, lady mother. Look at Alice's face. That's not sun-burn, I know."

"Maybe it isn't—maybe it isn't," replied Mrs. Malling, with a comfortable chuckle, whilst her fat face was turned up towards a gorgeous wool-worked text which hung directly over the head of the bed, "though I'll not say but what a day in the sun like she's just had mightn't have reddened the skin some."

"I am very sun-burnt," said Alice consciously.

"Why, we've been in the forest, where there's no sun, nearly all day," exclaimed Prudence quickly.

"Ah, them forests—them forests," observed Hephzibah,

in a pensive tone of reflection. "Folks say strange things about them forests."

"Yes," put in Alice, glad to turn attention from herself, "usually folks talk a lot of nonsense when they attribute supernatural things to certain places. But for once they're right, mother Hephzy; I shall never disbelieve in ghosts again. Oh, the horror of it—it was awful," and the girl gave a shudder of genuine horror.

"And could you see through 'em?" asked the old lady, in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"No, mother," chimed in Prudence, leaving the dressing-table and seating herself on the patchwork coverlet of the bed. "They seemed quite—solid."

"But they wore long robes," said Alice.

"Did they now?" said Mrs. Malling, wagging her head meaningly. "But the lore has it that spectres is flimsy things as ye can see through—like the steam from under he lid of a stewpan."

"Ye—es," said Alice thoughtfully.

"All I can say is, that I wonder George Iredale can live beside that graveyard. I tell you, mother, there's no arguing away what we saw. They came up out of one of those graves and marched in a procession into the ruined dead-house," said Prudence seriously.

"And my mare nearly threw me in her fright." Alice's face had paled at the recollection.

Hephzibah nodded complacently. She was thoroughly enjoying herself.

"True—true. That's just how 'tis. Animals has an instinct that ain't like to human. They sees more. Now maybe your horses just stood of a tremble, bimeby like? That's how it mostly takes 'em."

Under any other circumstances the two girls would probably have laughed at the good lady's appreciation of the supposed facts. But their adventures were of too recent a date; besides, they believed themselves. The gloom of the forest seemed to have got into their bones, and the horrid picture was still with them.

"The Haunted Hill," said Prudence musingly. "I don't think I ever heard in what way the valley was haunted. Have you, mother?"

"Sakes alive, girl, yes. It's the way you have said,

with fantastic fixin's added accordin' to taste. That's how it come I never believed. Folks disagreed about the spooks. They all allowed as the place was haunted, but their notions wasn't just alike. Your poor father, child, was a man o' sense, an' he argued as plain as a tie-post. He said there was fabrications around that valley 'cause of the variating yarns, and I wouldn't gainsay him. But, as Sarah says, when the washing don't dry white there's mostly a prairie fire somewheres around. Your father was that set on his point that he wouldn't never go an' see for himself, although, I do say, I urged him to it for the sake of truth."

Prudence yawned significantly and Alice had snuggled down on to her pillow. The former clambered in beneath the clothes.

"Well, mother, all I can say is that never again, unless I am forced to, will I visit Owl Hoot. And under any circumstances I will never run the risk of getting benighted there."

"Well, well," said the farm-wife, rising heavily to her feet and preparing to depart, "maybe George would like to hear about the thing you've seen when he comes back." She paused on her way to the door, and turned an earnest face upon the two girls. "Say, children, you didn't see no blue lights, did ye?"

"No, mother Hephzy," said Alice sleepily. "There were no blue lights."

"Ah," in a tone of relief. "There's no gainsaying the blue lights. They're bad. It means death, children, death, does the blue light—sure." And the good lady passed out of the room with the shuffling gait which a pair of loose, heelless slippers contrived to give her.

"Prue," said Alice, when the door had closed, "when are you going to ask Robb to come?"

"As soon as possible, if you like."

"Thanks. Good-night, dear; mother Hephzy is a sweet old thing."

The two girls turned over, and in a few moments were sleeping soundly. It would have taken more than the recollections of their adventures to banish sleep from their tired eyes. They slept the sweet refreshing sleep of those who have passed their waking hours in the strong, bracing air of the prairie.

Two days later Hervey was abroad early. He was cleaning his guns outside the back door of the house. Two weapons were lying upon a large dust sheet which was spread out upon the ground. The guns were in pieces, and each portion had been carefully oiled and wiped. He was now devoting his attention to a heavy revolver.

Prudence was standing in the kitchen doorway watching her brother. Andy was over by the barn, superintending the dispatch of the teams to the harvest fields; the hands were preparing to depart to their work. Prudence's early morning work was in the creamery.

Hervey looked up from the weapon he was cleaning, and turned his great eyes upon his sister.

"When is this fellow coming out here?" he asked in a tone of irritation. His question was merely the result of his own train of thought. He had not been speaking of any one in particular.

"Who? Robb Chillingwood?"

"Yes, of course. I've not heard of any one else's coming."

"We've asked him for a fortnight to-day. Why?"

Hervey ran the cleaning-rod through a couple of the chambers of the pistol before he spoke again. The rag jammed in the barrel and entailed a hard pull to extract it.

"Who asked him to come?" he went on, as he re-adjusted the piece of rag in the eye of the rod.

"Mother did. He's a very nice fellow." Prudence looked over at the parade of "Shire" teams as they started for the fields. "Alice and he are engaged to be married, you know."

"And I suppose he's coming out here to 'spoon' her —ugh! It's sickening."

"Don't be so brutal," the girl replied sharply.

"Brutal?" Hervey laughed coarsely. "You're getting particular. The house won't be a fit place to live in with an engaged couple in it. I should have thought mother would have known better than to have asked him."

"Don't be absurd."

Prudence moved from her stand. The dog, Neche, had slowly emerged from round the corner of the barn, and was now mouching leisurely towards her. She went over to meet him and caress his great ugly head.

"I'm not absurd." Hervey followed her movements with no very friendly gaze. He hated with an unreasonable hatred to see her go near the dog. "I know what engaged couples are. Look at the way some of the clowns around here carry on with their girls. When Mr. Robb Chillingwood takes up his abode here, I shall depart, I tell you straight. I think mother should have consulted me first. But, there, I suppose that little vixen Alice arranged it all. I hate that chum of yours."

"There's nothing like mutual regard, whatever its quality," laughed Prudence; but there was a look of anger in her deep brown eyes. "You are at liberty to please yourself as to your goings or comings—they make no difference to the work of the farm."

The girl's face was turned defiantly upon her brother. Hervey spun the chambers of the pistol round. His eyes remained upon the weapon, and his forefinger pressed sharply upon the trigger. He looked thoughtfully over the fore-sight and rested the pistol in the crook of his upraised, bent left arm. His attitude was one of taking steady aim. He made no reply.

Suddenly Prudence felt the bristling of Neche's mane under her hand. And she sought to soothe him. This dog's displays of sudden temper were as unaccountable as they were fierce.

"What are you going to do to-day?" she asked, as her brother did not speak and the dog quietened.

"Going over to Iredale's place. Why?"

"When shall you return?"

"Don't know." Hervey turned; his pistol was pointing towards his sister.

"Well, what about the 'thresher'? You and Andy were going to get it—— Look out!"

Her exclamation came with a shriek. The great husky had dashed from her side and made a charge towards its master. Its lips were drawn up, and its fearful, bared fangs gleamed in the morning light. Hervey lowered his weapon with a laugh. The dog paused irresolute, then, with a wicked growl, it turned back and sought again the girl's caressing hand.

"One of these days I'll give you something to snarl at, you d——d cur," Hervey said, between his clenched teeth.

Then he turned at the sound of his mother's voice. The old lady was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"What's all the fuss about?" she asked, turning her round eyes from one to the other. "Quarrelling again, I'll be bound. Breakfast's ready, so just come in, both of you, or the 'slap-jacks' 'll all be spoiled."

Prudence glanced covertly in the dog's direction as she obeyed the summons. She was fearful that the brute contemplated a further attack upon its master. In spite of the constant bickerings which took place between these two, the girl had no desire that her brother should be hurt.

Hervey spoke not a word during the morning meal, except to demand the food he required, and his surliness had a damping effect on those about him, and it was with a sigh of relief that his mother at last rose from the table and began to gather the plates preparatory to clearing away. Once, as Hervey moved slowly towards the door to return to his guns, she looked as though she were going to speak. But the words died on her lips, and she ambled off to the wash-house without speaking.

The atmosphere cleared when Hervey mounted his horse and rode off. His mother looked after him, sighed and shrugged; then she went on with her work with a touch of her old cheerful manner about her. No complaint ever passed her lips, but, to those who knew the kindly old face, the change that had come over it was very apparent. The smooth forehead was ploughed deeply with wrinkles which were new to it, and the eyes had lost something of their expression of placid content.

But Hervey travelled his own road at his own gait. His thoughts he kept to himself. The man was more or less inscrutable to those about him.

To-day he had taken his dog with him. He had at length made up his mind to rid himself of the brute. The exhibition of that morning had decided him upon a course which he had long meditated, but had always failed to carry out when the critical moment arrived.

The hound limped along beside its master's horse as they plunged into the deep woods of the Owl Hoot Valley. Nor did he show the least sign of wishing to wander from "heel." He followed on the beaten track, stubbornly

keeping pace with the horse in spite of the fact of only possessing three legs.

Arrived at the ranch Hervey handed over his horse to Chintz and proceeded into the woods on foot. To-day he meant to move out in a new direction. The valley beyond the Haunted Hill had been done regularly by him; now he was intent upon the hills on the south. Access to this region was obtained by the one other practicable exit from the valley; namely, the Haunted Hill, and then by bearing away to the right. He breasted the steep slopes of the hill and soon came upon the narrow overgrown trail which at some period had been hewn by the early settlers of the district.

Here he tramped along steadily, the hound limping at his heels. He walked slowly, with that long, lazy gait of a man accustomed to walking great distances. He gave little heed to his surroundings as far as the beauties of the place were concerned. He was not the man to regard Nature's handiwork in the light of artistic effects. His great roving eyes were never still; they moved swiftly from side to side, eagerly watching for the indication of game either furred or feathered. It seemed as though this sport was as the breath of life to him. Now and again his gaze would turn upon the hound behind him, and, on these occasions, the movement was evidently the result of some sudden, unpleasant thought, and had nothing to do with the sportsman's watchfulness which makes him seek to discover, in the alert canine attitude, some keener instinct of the presence of game than is possessed by the human being.

Almost without forewarning the road, after rounding an abrupt bend, suddenly opened out on to the graveyard clearing. It was the first time in Hervey's many wanderings in these regions that he had actually come across this obscure little cemetery. For a moment as he gazed upon it, he hardly realized what it was. Then, as he noted the ruined hut in the middle, the wooden fencing broken and tumbled about the place, and the armless and sadly leaning crosses and the various-shaped slabs of stone which marked the graves, he remembered the weird story his sister and her friend had told, and, advancing, he leant upon one of the fence posts and looked about him curiously.

He stood for some moments quite still. The place was silent with the peaceful calm of a sweltering August day. Hervey's eyes moved from one vaguely outlined grave to another, and unconsciously he counted them. Thirteen graves in all were visible amongst the long grass. Then his eyes turned upon the ruined hut. The roof had fallen in, and broken rafters protruded above the still standing walls of pine logs. The casing of the doorway remained, but the door had gone, and in its place hung a piece of tattered sacking. There was one small window, but this had been boarded over. The building was largely covered with lichen, and weeds had grown out of the mud-filling daubed in between the logs. There was something very desolate but wondrously peaceful about the place.

The master's curiosity seemed to have communicated itself to the hound, for the animal slowly, and with uncertain tread, moved off within the enclosure. Neche's movements were furtive; strangely so. But though Hervey's eyes now followed the dog's actions, it was merely the result of the attraction of the one moving object within the range of his vision, and not with any purpose of his own. In fact, it is doubtful if, at first, the animal's movements conveyed any meaning to the watching man. The moments slipped away and the dog snuffed inquiringly at the various curious objects its wolfish eyes beheld.

It stretched out its neck across one grave and snuffed at the projecting arm of a wooden cross. Then it drew back sharply with its little upstanding ears twitching with a motion of attention and canine uncertainty. Then the wolf head was turned in the direction of its master, and its unblinking gaze was fixed upon his face. The animal stood thus with ears constantly moving, turning this way and that, listening for any strange sound that might chance upon the air. Then with a dignified movement, so expressive of ill-concealed curiosity, it turned away to continue investigations in other directions.

The dog's show of indifference only lasted for a moment. In limping towards the central hut the animal stepped on to the only path which was not overgrown with rank vegetation. The instant its foot touched the sandy soil its head went down until its nose touched the ground.

Then followed a loud snuff. The dog's great mane bristled ominously, and a low growl sounded significantly upon the still air. Now Hervey's gaze instantly became one of keen intelligence. His thoughts no longer wandered, but were of the present. He watched the movements of the hound with the profoundest interest.

The dog moved a step or two forward. Its attitude was as though it wished to make no mistake. The snuffing came short, quick and incisive. Then the great head was raised, and the snuffing continued upon the air. Now the nose turned in the direction of the hut, then it turned back to the opposite direction of the path. Hervey remained motionless where he stood, and his thoughts were filled with wondering speculation.

Suddenly the dog darted off down the path, away from the hut. There was something very like the sleuth in its attitude. Nor did it pause until the path terminated at a stone-covered grave. Here the brute's eagerness was displayed to the full. Its excitement was intense. The low growls became more frequent and tense. The bristling mane, so thick and wolfish, fairly quivered in its rigidity. Balancing itself on its one hind foot it tore away at the baked earth around the stone with its huge fore-paws, as though it would tear up the whole grave and lay bare the mouldering bones it contained.

Hervey encouraged the eager hound.

"See—ek 'em," he hissed, in an undertone.

The dog responded, making the earth fly beneath its sharp claws. The animal's excitement had communicated itself to its master, and the man's great eyes glowed strangely. He now moved from his position and came over to the dog's side. He stooped down and examined the place where the dog had been working. He pushed his fingers deep into the hollow which the vigorous claws had made. The next instant he drew them back sharply, and a faint ejaculation escaped him. He straightened himself up and pushed the dog roughly away from the spot.

"Come here, you cur," he muttered. "Come over to the hut."

The dog obeyed with reluctance, and Hervey had to keep a clutch upon the beast's mane to hold him to his

side. He half dragged him and half led him up the path until they neared the ruin. Then with a bound the dog leapt forward and rushed in beneath the sacking which covered the doorway, giving tongue to little yelps of eagerness as he went.

Hervey was about to follow, but a strange sound beneath his feet attracted him and made him pause. He listened. The noise went on. It was very faint but quite distinct, and very like the regular fall of a hammer. He called instantly to the dog. Neche's head appeared from beneath the canvas, but he showed unusual signs of disobedience. Instantly, Hervey seized him by the mane, then, subdued and sulky, the animal allowed himself to be dragged from the building. Hervey did not relax his hold until he and the dog were well clear of the place, and were once more buried from view within the depths of the woods.

For a moment, when the hound regained its freedom, it stood still and turned its head back towards the place they had just left, but a threatening command from the man brought him to heel at once, and there was no further bother. It was strange the relations which existed between this curiously-assorted pair. There could be no doubt that Hervey hated the dog, and the dog's regard for its master was of doubtful quality. As a rule, it would fawn in a most servile manner, but its attitude, the moment its master's back was turned, was always morose and even truculent. Hervey had told his sister that the dog was as treacherous as an Indian. But Hervey was not a keen observer, or he would have added, " and as wicked as a rattlesnake."

The two tramped on all day, but there was little shooting done. Hervey also seemed to have utterly forgotten his intention to shoot the dog. Time after time jack-rabbits got up and dashed off into the woods, but there followed no report of the gun. Prairie chicken in the open glades whirred up from the long succulent grass, but Hervey paid no heed, and when several deer trotted across the man's path, and the gun remained tucked under his arm, it plainly showed the pre-occupied state of his mind.

The truth was that Hervey was thinking with a profundity that implied something which must very nearly

affect his personal interests. And these personal interests, at the moment, centred round George Iredale and—the graveyard. He had discredited the story the girls had told as he would discredit anything which pertained to the supernatural. But now he had learned something which put an entirely different meaning to the adventures the two girls had related. It is easy enough to mystify the simple human mind, but dogs' instincts are purely practical, and, as Hervey argued, ghosts do not leave a hot scent. Neche had lit upon a hot scent. At first the man had been doubtful as to what that scent was. Graveyards on the prairie are places favoured by the hungry coyote, and he had been inclined to believe that such was the trail which the dog had discovered. But his own investigations had suggested something different.

The grave which the dog had attacked so furiously was no ordinary grave, for, in thrusting his hand into the hole the dog had made at the edge, he had found that beneath the stone was a cavity. Then had come the recollection of the faint poundings he had distinctly heard beneath the ground. And instantly the story the girls had related assumed a human aspect. Without hesitation he told himself that they had not seen spectres marching in procession through the mysterious graveyard, but real, live, human beings. What, he asked himself, was the meaning of it? What strange occupation was George Iredale's in this lonely valley? Where was Iredale now? Where did he go to when he moved out of the district on business, and what was the nature of the business? To Hervey it was no great step from questions of this sort to a general answer. And, when he reviewed the isolation, the secret nightly doings, the unsuitability of the district to cattle-raising, and the great wealth of the owner, all made since his sojourn in the country, it was no difficult task for his thoughts to suggest some felonious undertaking. But the one question for which he could find no reasonable reply was that which asked the nature of the doings which seemed to go on at night in the shadow of those dense forests.

He tramped on heedless of the passing time. His discovery had roused him to a pitch of excitement which swayed his thoughts in the direction they would naturally

incline. In what manner could he turn his discovery to account? His sense of proportion quickly balanced his ideas. He must at all costs learn the secret of the graveyard, and if it was, as he believed, some "crooked" dealings upon which Iredale was engaged, the rest would be easy. All he wanted was money, and the owner of Lonely Ranch had plenty and to spare.

The sun was quite low over the horizon when he at length turned his steps again in the direction of the ranch. He was hungry; he had eaten nothing since breakfast.

Hervey was not the man to be disturbed by any scruples with regard to the hospitality of the owner of Lonely Ranch. He partook of the ample supper which Chintz had prepared for him without the slightest compunction. And when it was finished he idled the time away smoking one of Iredale's best cigars with the utmost enjoyment. He watched the shadows grow and deepen. He waited until the blue vault of the sky had changed its hue to the indescribable shadow which follows in the wake of the daylight, and the sparkling diamonds of night shone out upon its surface; then he called for his horse and set out ostensibly for Loon Dyke.

He rode away down the valley until he was clear of the woods; then, leaving the prairie trail, he turned away to the right, and, describing a wide semi-circle, doubled back into the woods again, taking a course which lay to the eastwards, parallel to the valley of the ranch. Now he quickened his pace, and the hound, limping laboriously at his horse's heels, had difficulty in keeping up with him. Nor did he draw rein until he reached the wide hollow which backed the graveyard hill. Here, however, he dismounted, and secured his horse to a tree. Then he removed the reins from his horse's bridle, and proceeded to secure the hound in an adjacent position. The night had quite closed in and the darkness of the woods was profound when he started to make his way up the side of the hill in the direction of the graveyard.

Hervey paused for nothing. His mind was clearly made up. Whatever weakness may have been his there was none to be traced in his actions now. He saw ahead of him the possibilities of furthering his own interests, and he revelled in the thought of George Iredale's wealth.

The despicable methods he was adopting troubled him not in the least. Iredale should pay dearly if his work partook of the nature of crime.

Hervey entertained no friendship for any one. The greed of gold was his ruling passion. He cared nothing from whom it was obtained, or by what means. If things were as he believed them to be, then was this a truly golden opportunity. And he would bleed Iredale to the very limits of his resources.

He reached the outskirts of the clearing, but he did not leave the obscurity of the forest. The black recesses served him for a hiding-place from which he could obtain a perfect view of the ghostly enclosure. The tumbled hut and the weirdly-outlined graves with their crowning monuments showed up distinctly in the starlight. And he settled himself for a long vigil.

An hour passed without result. It was weary work, this waiting. He dared not move about, for at every movement of his feet upon the ground the rotting vegetation crunched and crackled loudly in the profundity of silence. The man's patience, however, was long-enduring under such circumstances. He told himself that the result would more than recompense him for the trouble. He had everything to gain, and the task appealed to him. Two hours passed and still not a sound broke the awful stillness. Then came the first sign. Suddenly a bright light shone out down in the valley in the direction where Iredale's house stood. It gleamed luridly, almost red, in its depth of yellow. Hervey held his breath, so deep was his excitement and the feeling of anticipation.

The sudden appearance of the light was the signal for further demonstration. The prolonged screech of an owl replied to it. The screech, so shrill and ear-piercing, gave the watcher such a nerve-racking moment as to almost urge him to beat a hasty retreat. But the cry died away, and, as the echoes grew fainter and eventually became silent, he recovered himself. A moment passed and another cry split the air, only this time it came from across the valley on the opposite heights. Hervey stood with ears straining. He had detected something curious in the sound of those cries. Then as the second died away a single word muttered below his breath voiced his discovery.

" Human ! " he said to himself, and a feeling of unholy joy swept over him, and he drew a pistol from his pocket and his hand gripped its butt significantly.

His eyes were still turned in the direction of the house where the light was burning when a scraping noise suddenly drew his attention to the graveyard before him. The scraping continued, and sounded like the grinding of an axe upon a whetstone. It distinctly came from one of the graves, and, for a moment, he experienced a shudder of superstitious fear. The next moment he suppressed a chuckle as he realized that the sound came from the grave at the side of which Neche had made such a demonstration that morning. He gazed in the direction, his great eyes burning with the lurid fires of pent-up excitement and speculation. What was the secret he was about to learn ? He longed to draw closer to the spot, but he knew that he dared not move.

Suddenly a vague shadow loomed up from amongst the grass which grew so rankly in the cemetery. Up, up it rose, black even against the background of utter darkness in which the forest was bathed. Hervey leaned forward, his eyes straining and every nerve tense-drawn. What was this—thing ?

The shadow paused. Then it rose higher. It seemed to suddenly straighten up, and Hervey permitted a deep breath to escape him. The black figure had assumed the shape of a man, and the form moved forward towards the log dead-house. Then the waiting man saw that other figures were following the first in rapid succession. Each figure was bearing its burden. Some seemed to be carrying bundles, some carried that which appeared to be boxes, and others carried small square packages. As Hervey's eyes became used to the strange scene he was able to distinguish something of the habiliments of these denizens of the grave. He noted the long, dark, smock-shaped garment each figure wore, and, after a while, in the starlight, he was able to note that most of them wore on their heads little skull-caps. Then a muttered exclamation broke from his lips, and in his tone was a world of satisfaction.

" Chinese ! " he whispered. Then: " Traffic in yellow, by all that's holy ! "

CHAPTER XII

THE BREAKING OF THE STORM

THE master of Lonely Ranch was seated before the table in his unpretentious sitting-room. Before him were piled a number of open account-books, and books containing matters relating to the business of his ranch.

He was not looking at them now, but sat gazing at the blank wall in front of him with thoughtful, introspective eyes. His chin was resting upon his clenched hands, and his elbows were propped upon the table. He was sitting with his shirt-sleeves rolled up above his elbows, for the day was hot and the air was close and heavy. On one hand the window was wide open, but no jarring sounds came in to disturb the thinker. The door on the other side was also open wide. George Iredale showed no desire for secrecy. His attitude was that of a man who feels himself to be perfectly safeguarded against any sort of surprise. Thus he sat in the quiet of the oppressive heat thinking of many things which chiefly concerned his life in the valley of Owl Hoot.

He had been going over the accounts which represented his fifteen years of labour in that quiet corner of the great Dominion, and the perusal had given him a world of satisfaction. Fifteen years ago he had first settled in the valley. He had acquired the land for a mere song; for no one would look at the region of Owl Hoot as a district suitable either for stock-raising or for the cultivation of grain. But he had seen possibilities in the place—possibilities which had since been realized even beyond his expectations. His sense of humour was tickled as he thought of the cattle he had first brought to the ranch—a herd of old cows which he had picked up cheap somewhere out West at the foot of the Rockies.

He almost laughed aloud as he thought of the way in which he had fostered and added to the weird, stupid legends of the place, and how he had never failed to urge the undesirability of his neighbourhood for any sort of agriculture. And thus for fifteen years he had kept the surrounding country clear of inquisitive settlers. Life had been very pleasant, quiet, monotonous, and profitable for him, and, as he thought of it all, his eyes drooped again to his books before him, and he gazed upon a sea of entries in a long, thick, narrow volume which bore on the cover the legend—

OPIUM.

Yes, he never attempted to disguise from himself the nature of his calling. He plastered neither himself nor his trade with thick coatings of white-wash. He knew what he was, and faced the offensive title with perfect equanimity. He was a smuggler, probably the largest operator in the illicit traffic of opium smuggling, and the most successful importer of Chinese along the whole extent of the American border. He knew that the penitentiary was yearning for him; and he knew that every moment of his life was shadowed by the threat of penal servitude. And in the meantime he was storing up his wealth, not in driblets, dependent upon the seasons for their extent, but in huge sums which were proportionate to the risks he was prepared to run.

And his risks had been many, and his escapes narrow and frequent. But he had hitherto evaded the law, and now the time had come when he intended to throw it all up—to blot out at one sweep the traces of those fifteen prosperous years, and settle down to enjoy the proceeds of his toil.

It was only after much thought and after months of deliberation that he had arrived at this decision. For this man revelled in his calling with an enthusiasm which was worthy of an honest object. He was not a man whose natural inclinations leant towards law-breaking; far from it. Outside of his trade he lived a cleaner life than many a so-called law-abiding citizen. The risks he ran, the excitement of contraband trade had a fatal fascination which was as the breath of life to him; a

fascination which, with all his strength of mind in every other direction, he was as powerless to resist as were the consumers powerless to resist the fascinations of the drug he purveyed.

But now he stood face to face with a contingency he had never taken into his considerations. He had fallen a victim to man's passion for a woman; and he had been forced to a choice between the two things. Either he must renounce all thoughts of Prudence Malling, or he must marry her, and break from all his old associations. To a man of Iredale's disposition the two things were incompatible. The steady growth of his love for this girl, a love which absorbed all that was best in his deep, strong nature, had weighed heavily in the balance; and, reluctant though the master of Lonely Ranch was to sever himself from the traffic which had afforded him so much wealth, and so many years of real, living moments, his decision had been taken with calm deliberation; the fiat had gone forth. Henceforth the traffic in yellow would know him no more.

He rose from his seat, and crossing the room stood gazing out of the open window. Finally his eyes were turned up towards the heavy banking of storm-clouds which hovered low over the valley.

Already the greater portion of his plans had been carefully laid. They had been costly for many reasons. His agents were men who required to be dealt with liberally. However, everything had been satisfactorily settled. Now only remained the disposal of the ranch. This was rather a delicate matter for obvious reasons. He wished to effectually obliterate all traces of the traffic he had carried on there.

He went back to the table and picked up an official-looking letter. It was a communication from Robb Chillingwood, written on the municipal note-paper of Ainsley.

He read the letter carefully through.

"My dear Mr. Iredale,

"There is a man named Gordon Duffield stopping at the hotel here, who has lately arrived from Scotland. I have effected the sale of the Dominion Ranch—you

know, the German, Grieg's, old place—to him. He is a man of considerable means, and is going in largely for stock-raising. He has commissioned me to buy something like five thousand head of cows and two-year-old steers for him. His bulls he brought out with him. You will understand the difficulty I shall have in obtaining such a bunch of suitable animals; and I thought you might have some surplus stock that you wish to dispose of at a reasonable price. You might let me know by return if such is the case, always bearing in mind when you make your quotations that the gentleman hails from old Scotia. There is shortly to be a great boom in emigration from both the old country and the States, and I am now combining the business of land agent with my other duties, and I find it a paying concern. Let me know about the cattle at your earliest convenience.

"Yours truly,

"ROBB CHILLINGWOOD."

Iredale smiled as he read the letter over.

"Comes at an opportune moment," he said to himself. "Surplus stock, eh? Well, I think I can offer him all the stock he needs at a price which will meet with the approval of even a canny Scot. I'll write him at once."

He seated himself at his table and wrote a long letter asking Chillingwood to come out and see him, and, at the same time, offering to dispose of the stock of Lonely Ranch. He sealed the letter, and then returned his account-books to their hiding-place behind the bookcase. Then he went to the door and summoned his head man.

In spite of the habit of years, Iredale was not without a strong sense of relief as he reviewed the progress of the disestablishment of the ranch. He remembered how narrowly he had escaped from Leslie Grey less than a year ago, and now that he had begun to burn his boats he was eager to get through with the process.

The ferret-faced Chintz framed himself in the doorway.

"My horse!" demanded his master. "And, Chintz, I want you to take this letter to Lakeville and post it with your own hands. You understand?"

The little man nodded his head.

"Good!" Iredale paused thoughtfully. "Chintz,"

he went on a moment later, " we've finished with opium. We retire into private life from now out—you and I. We are going to leave Owl Hoot. How does that suit you ? "

The little man cheerfully nodded, and twisted his face into a squinting grimace intended for a pleasant smile. Then his eyebrows went up inquiringly. Iredale took his meaning at once.

" I don't know where we are going as yet. But you'll go with me. I want you to remain my ' head man.' "

Chintz nodded. There could be no doubt from his expression that he was devoted to his master.

" Right. Send my horse round at once. I am going to Loon Dyke, and shall be back for supper."

The man departed, and the rancher prepared for his ride.

When George Iredale set out for Loon Dyke the valley was shrouded in the gloom of coming storm. But he knew the peculiarities of the climate too well to be alarmed. The storm, he judged, would not break until nearly sundown, and then it would only be short and sharp. In the meantime he would have reached the farm. There was a curious, unconscious rapidity in his way of settling up his affairs. It was as though some strange power were urging him to haste. This may have been the result of the man's character, for he was of a strikingly vigorous nature. He had put the machinery in motion, and now he primed it with the oil of eager desire to see the work swiftly carried out.

As his horse galloped over the prairie—he took the direct route of the crow's flight—his thoughts centred upon the object of his visit. He saw nothing of the pleasant fields and pastures through which his journey took him. The threat of coming storm was nothing to him. For all heed he paid to it the sky might have been of a tropical blue. The ruffling prairie chicken rose lazily in their coveys, with their crops well filled with the gleanings of the harvested wheat fields, but he scarcely even saw them. All he saw was the sweet, dark face of the girl to whom he intended to put the question which women most love to hear; whether it be put by the man of their choice or by some one for whom they care not a cent. He had always longed for this day to come, but, until now, had never seen how such could ever dawn

for him. It had been a great wrench to sever himself from the past, but his decision once taken his heart was filled with thankfulness, and never had he felt so free from care as now. He realized all that a lover may realize of his own unworthiness, but he allowed himself no extravagances of thought in this direction. Prudence was a good woman, he knew, and he intended, if Fate so willed, to devote the rest of his life to her happiness. As he drew near to his destination his heart beat a shade faster, and doubts began to assail him. He found himself speculating upon his chances of success. He believed that the daughter of Hephzibah Malling regarded him with favour, but nothing had gone before to give him any clue to her maiden feelings. He wondered doubtfully, and, in proportion, his nervousness increased.

Out upon the trail, at a distance, he saw a horseman riding away from the farm; he did not even trouble about the rider's identity. The strong, reckless nature, concealed beneath his quiet exterior, urged him on to learn his fate. Nothing mattered to him now but his sentence as pronounced by the child of the prairie whose love he sought.

There were three occupants of the sitting-room at the farm. Prudence and Alice Gordon were at the table, which was covered by a litter of tweed dress material and paper patterns. Prudence was struggling with a maze of skirt-folds, under which a sewing-machine was almost buried. Alice was cutting and pinning and basting seams at the other end of the table. Sarah Gurridge was standing beside the open window watching the rising of the storm.

Conversation came spasmodically. The girls were intent upon their work.

"It's all very well to have new dresses," said Prudence, with an impatient tug at the material on which the machine was operating, "but I'm afraid half the pleasure of them is absorbed by the process of 'making.' Oh, these endless seams! And I don't believe a single one of them is straight. I feel quite hopeless."

"Cheer up, Prue," said Alice, without looking up. She herself was endeavouring to set a wristband pattern upon a piece of stuff so that she could get the two bands out of barely enough cloth for one. "You should use

more dash when working a machine. When you are turning it, imagine you are driving a ' through mail ' to the coast and have to make up time. The seams will come all right."

" Yes; and break cotton and needles, and—and land the engine over the side of a cut-bank, or run down a gang of plate-layers or something. There now, I've run clean off the cloth. I wish you wouldn't talk so much."

The two girls laughed whilst they joined efforts in righting the catastrophe.

" Isn't it getting dark ? " said Alice, when Prudence had once more settled to work.

Sarah spoke without turning from the window.

" The storm 's banking, child. The lightning is already flashing over Owl Hoot way. Hervey will only just escape it."

" What did he want to go over to the ranch for ? " asked Prudence. " He never seems to go anywhere else now. I should think Mr. Iredale will get sick of having him always round."

" My dear," observed Sarah, with unction, " when two men enjoy destroying the harmless life which the good God has set upon the prairie, they never tire of one another's society. Men who would disdain to black a pair of boots would not hesitate to crawl about in the mud and damp reeds of a swamp at daybreak to slaughter a few innocent ducks. There is a bond amongst sportsmen which is stronger than all the vows made at any altar. Hervey's delight in destroying life is almost inhuman. I trust he never shoots sitting game."

" I should hope not," said Prudence. " I would never own him as a brother if he did. Hello, Neche," as the door was pushed slowly open and the great husky limped heavily into the room. The animal looked round him in a dignified, unblinking way, and then came over to Prudence's side and leisurely curled himself up on the skirt of her dress. " Say, old boy," she added, looking down at the recumbent form, " if mother comes in and finds you here you'll leave the room hurriedly."

Alice laid her scissors down and looked over at her friend.

" Hervey seems quieter than ever lately. He won't even take the trouble to quarrel."

"And a good thing too," said Prudence shortly.

Sarah turned and surveyed the two girls for a moment, an amused expression was in her dreamy eyes. Then she turned back to the window as the first distant growl of the coming storm made itself heard.

"Hervey only quarrels when his mind is in a state of stagnation. The mind of a man is very like a pool of water. Let it stand, and it corrodes with matter which throws off offensive odours. The longer it stands the worse state it gets into. Set the water in motion, turn it into a running stream, and it at once cleanses itself. Hervey's mind has been lately set in motion. I have noticed the change."

"He has certainly become less offensive of late," said Alice. "I wonder what has changed him."

"Food for mental occupation," said Sarah.

"'A life monotonous, unrelieved, breeds selfish discontent,
Dead'ning a mind to lofty thought for which by nature meant.'"

Prudence brought the machine to a standstill, and propping one elbow upon the table rested her chin upon her hand.

"I believe you are right, Aunt Sarah," she said slowly. "Hervey's certainly found something which has set him thinking. I rather fancy I know—or can guess—what it is that has roused him."

The old lady turned from the window and gazed curiously at her pupil. She was keenly interested. The recreation of her life was the observation of her kind. Her logic and philosophy may not always have been sound, but she never failed to arrive somewhere in the region of the truth. The recent change in Hervey had puzzled her.

"He asked me yesterday to let him see that notice in the *Free Press* which appeared when Leslie was murdered," Prudence went on. "He also asked me what Leslie's dying words were. He insisted on the exact words."

"The storm will break soon," observed Sarah. She had turned away to the window.

"I wonder," said Alice; "perhaps he has discovered——" She broke off meaningly.

"That's what I think," said Prudence.

Sarah shook her head; but what she meant to convey was uncertain, for she had her back turned and she said nothing at the moment. Prudence restarted her machine and Alice reluctantly bent over her patterns. Sarah moved back from the window. She saw a horseman galloping over the prairie in the direction of the house. She had recognized Iredale.

"Girls," she said, her soft eyes turning on Prudence's bent head, "I really think some one should be helping the mother. This is baking day." Prudence looked up with an expression of contrition. "No—no, not you, child. You stay here and get on with your fandangles and dressmaking. I'll go and help her."

Without waiting for a reply she darted off. She had no intention of having her innocent little scheme upset. The moment after her departure the clatter of horse's hoofs came in through the open window. Alice, looking up, saw Iredale dismounting from his horse. She jumped up to go to the front door.

"Here's Mr. Iredale!" she exclaimed. Then: "So he's returned home. I'm so glad. One scarcely knows the place without him."

She dashed out to meet him, and, a moment later, returned ushering him in.

"Mr. George Iredale," she announced, with mock ceremony. Then she stood aside to allow him to pass, bowing low as he entered the room. She stood for a moment smiling upon the burly figure. She noted how the plain features lit up at the sight of the girl bending over the sewing-machine. Then she gave herself an obvious cue.

"I'll go and call mother Hephzy," she said, and retreated hastily to the bake-house.

Iredale moved over to where Prudence was sitting. She had ceased work to greet him, but she did not rise from the table. Neche surveyed the intruder, grunted and closed his eyes again. Prudence was half inclined to resent Alice's sudden departure. Alice was in her confidence; she knew her feelings as regarded George Iredale. She considered her friend's action was unkind.

"You mustn't let me disturb you, Prudence," Iredale said in his low, pleasant voice. "What is this"—fingering the new material—"a new fall dress? Wonderful how

you can cope with the intricacies of the manufacture of such things. It would be a very sorry day for me if I were left to cut my own coats." He laughed nervously.

Prudence detected an unusual eagerness in his voice, and something warned her that this man had come over that afternoon to see her alone. She joined in the laugh, but her eyes remained quite serious.

"When did you come back from town?" she asked, after a pause.

"I haven't been to town. I've been across the border. My business took me into Minnesota."

"Oh, I thought you had been to Winnipeg." She stooped and caressed the great dog at her feet.

Iredale shook his head. A vivid flash of lightning shot across the open window, and a crash of thunder followed it immediately. The storm was breaking at last.

"I'll close the window." Iredale moved across the room to do so. Prudence looked after him. When he returned he sat himself in Alice's chair, having brought it nearer to the machine. Then followed a long silence while the machine rattled down a seam. The man watched the nimble fingers intently as they guided the material under the needle. The bent head prevented him seeing more than the barest outline of the girl's cheek, but he seemed content. Now that the moment had arrived for him to speak, he was quite master of himself.

"Prudence," he began, at last, "I am giving up my ranch. I have been making the necessary arrangements. I have done with money-making."

"Really." The girl looked up sharply, then down again at her work. She had encountered the steady gaze of the man's earnest eyes. "Are you going to—to leave us?" She was conscious of the lameness of her question.

"I don't quite know. That depends largely upon circumstances. I am certainly about to seek pleasant places, but I cannot tell yet where those pleasant places will be found. Perhaps you will help me."

"How?" The seam swerved out into a great bow, and Prudence was forced to go back over it.

"Easily enough, if you will."

The girl did not answer, but busied herself with the manipulation of her machine. Her face had paled, and

her heart was thumping in great pulsations. Iredale went on. He had assumed his characteristic composure. What fire burned beneath his calm exterior, it would have needed the discerning eyes of Sarah Gurridge to detect, for, beyond the occasional flashing of his quiet grey eyes, there was little or no outward sign.

"I have known you for a good many years, child; years which have helped to put a few grey hairs on my head, it is true, but still years which have taught me something which I never dreamed of learning out here on the prairie. They have taught me that such a thing as love exists for every man on this earth, and that somewhere in this world there is a woman who can inspire him with feelings which make the pettinesses of his own solitary existence seem very small indeed. I have learned that man was not made to live alone, but that a certain woman must share his life with him, or that life is an utterly worthless thing. I have learned that there is but one woman in the world who can help me to the better, loftier aspirations of man, and that woman is—you, Prudence."

The girl had ceased to work, and was staring straight in front of her out of the window, where the vivid lightning was now flashing incessantly. As Iredale pronounced the last words she shook her head slowly—almost helplessly. The man had leaned forward in his chair, and his elbows rested on his parted knees, and his hands were tightly clasped.

"Don't shake your head, dear," he went on, with persuasive earnestness. "Hear me out first, and then you shall give me your decision. I know I am much older than you, but surely that disparity need not stand in our way. I dare say I have many more years of life yet left than lots of younger men. Besides, I am rich—very rich. With me you can live the life you choose. If you wish to stay here on the prairie, why, you shall have the most perfect farm that money can buy; if, on the other hand, you choose to see the world, you only have to say the word. Prudence, I know I am not a very attractive man. I have little to recommend me, and my life has not always been spent as perhaps it should have been; but I love you very dearly, and my future shall be devoted to your happiness. Will you be my wife?"

There was a deafening crash of thunder which seemed to come from directly overhead. The dog started up with a growl. Then he stood looking up into the girl's face. The dying reverberations slowly rolled away and left the room in deathly silence. The serious light in the girl's eyes was augmented by the decided set of her mouth. She kept her face studiously turned from Iredale, who, observing with all the intuition of a man in deadly earnest, read in her expression something of what his answer was to be.

"Can you not—do you not care for me sufficiently?"

The words contained such a world of appeal that Prudence felt herself forced to turn in his direction. She now looked squarely into his eyes, nor was there the faintest suspicion of embarrassment in her manner. The moment had come when she must choose between herself and her self-imposed duty. She knew that she loved Iredale, but—she checked something which sounded very like a sigh. She had listened to the precepts of Sarah Gurridge all her life, and, in consequence, she had learned to regard her duty before all things. She now conceived she had a great duty to perform. She felt so helpless—so feeble in the matter; but the voice of conscience held her to her mistaken course.

"I believe I love you; I am sure I care for you very, very much, but——"

"Then you will marry me." The man reached out to take her hand, but she drew it back. His eager eyes shone in the stormy darkness in which the room was bathed.

She shook her head.

"When Leslie Grey was murdered I made a vow that I would not rest until the murderer was brought to justice. My vow is unfulfilled. I could not marry you and be happy while this is so. Do you know what marriage with you would mean? Simply that I should make no effort to fulfil my vow to the dead. I cannot marry you now."

Iredale was staggered by the woeful wrong-mindedness under which he considered she was labouring. For a moment he could scarcely find words to express himself.

"But—but surely, child, you are not going to let this phantom of duty come between us? Oh, you can never

do such a thing! Besides, we would work together; we would not leave a stone unturned to discover the wretch who did him to death——"

He broke off. Prudence answered swiftly, and the set of her face seemed to grow harder as she felt the difficulty of abiding by her resolve.

"This is no phantom of duty, George. It is very much a reality. I cannot marry you—until—until——"

Iredale was smiling now. The shock of the girl's strange decision had passed. He saw something of the motive underlying it. Her sense of duty seemed to have warped her judgment, and, with quiet firmness, he meant to set it aside.

"And this is the only reason for refusing me?" he asked. He had become serious again; he seemed merely to be seeking assurance.

"Yes. Oh, George, can't you see how it is?" She gazed appealingly into his face. And the man had to keep a very tight hold upon his feelings.

"I am afraid I am a little dense, child," he said gravely.

"I must make you understand," Prudence went on with nervous haste. Her conscience urged her forward, whilst her love prompted her to set aside all recollection of the dead and to bask in the love this man offered her. She was a simple, womanly soul, trying with all the strength of her honest purpose to resist the dictates of her love, and to do that which seemed right in her own eyes. The task she had set herself had seemed easy when she had spoken of it to Alice, but now in the face of this man's love, in the face of her own self-realization, it seemed beyond her strength. "Listen to me, and you will see for yourself that I must not marry you—yet. I believed that I loved Leslie Grey truly, fondly. As I look back now I am sure I did. I was never happy but when I was with him. He seemed so strong and resolute. I never had a moment in which to doubt myself. Then, when he died, the agony I suffered was something too dreadful to contemplate. As he lay on the little bed with his life slowly ebbing, and I watched him dying by inches, I was filled with such horror and despair that I thought surely I should go mad. Then it dawned

on me that he had been murdered, and my anguish turned to a dreadful feeling of rage and longing to avenge him. Never in my life did I experience such terrible passion as at that moment. I believe at the time I really was mad. The one thought in my mind was, 'Who—who has done this thing?' Then Leslie died, and in his death agony he spoke and told me, as well as his poor gasping faculties could tell me, what had happened. His words were unintelligible to every one except me. And those words form a clue to the assassin's identity. By his bedside I swore to avenge him. Never would I rest until my oath was carried out. As you know, after that I became ill and went away. And, oh, the shame of it, during those months of rest and illness I forgot Leslie Grey, I forgot my vow. I forgot everything that claimed my duty. Think of it—the shame, the shallow heartlessness, the fickle nature which is mine. I, who had loved him as I believed no girl had ever loved, had forgotten him as though he had never come into my life."

Iredale nodded comprehensively as the girl paused.

"Then you came into my life," Prudence went on. Her face was turned towards the window now, outside of which she saw the tongues of lightning playing across the sky. "Time went on, and slowly something crept into my heart which made me realize my shortcomings. Gradually my conduct was revealed to me in its true colours, and I saw myself as I really was—a heartless, worthless creature, so despicable, even to myself, as to make me shudder when I contemplated the future. Let me be honest now, at least. I knew that I loved you, George, that is"—bitterly—"as far as I was capable of love; but what sort of affection was mine to give to anybody? I could not trust myself—I despised myself. My conscience cried out. Leslie's unavenged death still remained. My vow was still unfulfilled. Knowing this, how could I believe in this new love which had come to me? No, I could not. And it was then that I saw what I must do. Before I could ever dream of love I must redeem the pledge I made at Leslie's deathbed. That alone could restore my faith in myself. I know that it is almost impossible to convey to you all that I

have thought upon the matter; but, believe me, I can never marry while Leslie remains unavenged."

Tears stood in the girl's eyes as she finished up her curiously twisted self-accusations. And the sincerity of her words was not to be doubted for a moment. Iredale had listened wonderingly, and he marvelled to himself at the wonders of perspective in a woman's mind.

"And you are prepared to undertake the matter—alone?"

"Mother is helping me—it costs money."

"Just so. But would not a man's help be of greater importance than your mother's? Don't you think that your husband's assistance might help you far more? That it might be able to lighten the burden of this self-imposed labour. Tut, tut, child. Because of your vow it should not deter you from marriage, especially when your husband is not only ready, but most willing to assist you in clearing up the mystery, and avenging Leslie Grey. As regards the quality"—with a quiet smile—"of your regard, well, come, you love me, little girl, on your own confession, and if you have no graver scruples than you have offered, then you must—marry me."

Iredale leant forward and took the girl's two hands in his. This time she made no resistance. She allowed them to rest in his broad palms, and, in spite of all her protests, felt ineffably happy.

At last she drew them away and shook her head weakly.

"No, it is no good, George. You must not be burdened with my undertaking. I cannot consent to such a thing. It is only your generosity and kindness which make you look at the matter so lightly. You would regret your decision later on, and then——No, mother and I will see the matter through. We have already secured the services of the smartest detective in Winnipeg, and he is working upon the only clue we possess."

"But I insist," said Iredale, with a smile which made his plain features almost handsome. "And, Prue, I am going to tell your mother that you have engaged yourself to me, and that I am a new recruit, fortune as well, in the work. No"—holding up his hand as the girl was about to protest again—"no objections, sweetheart. And, before we go further, tell me of this clue."

Prudence smiled happily. She had done her duty; she had laid bare her heart to this man. She had spared herself in no way. She had let him see, she told herself, the sort of girl she was. He still cared for her; he still wished to marry her. She bowed her will to his quiet decision.

"It is not much to go upon, but, as Deane, that is the detective, says, it is a decided clue."

She rose from her seat and walked over to a small work-table. At that moment the house shook to its very foundations with a dreadful crash of thunder. Neche, who had moved with her, leapt fiercely at the window as though flying at some invisible enemy. The girl called him to her side, then she stood trembling. Flash after flash of lightning blazed in the heavens, and she covered her eyes with her hands, whilst the thunder seemed as though it would rend the earth from end to end. Iredale was at her side in an instant, and his arm was about her, and he drew her head upon his shoulder. Instantly her nerve was restored, and, as the noise passed, she quietly released herself. Then, stooping, she opened the drawer of the table and produced a torn copy of the Winnipeg *Free Press*. She held out the paper and pointed to the personal column.

"See," she said, with her index finger upon the second line of the column. "'Yellow booming—slump in Grey.' Those who are responsible for that message, whatever it may mean, are also responsible for Leslie's death."

Iredale's eyes were fixed with a terrible fascination upon the print. A breath escaped him which sounded almost like a gasp. His hands clenched at his sides, and he stood like one turned into stone.

"How—how do you know this?" he asked, in a tense, hoarse voice.

"Leslie said so with his last dying breath."

There came no answering word to the girl's statement. Iredale did not move. His eyes were still upon the paper. The silence of death reigned in the room. Even the storm seemed suddenly to have ceased; only was there the incessant swish of the torrential rain outside.

"That is the clue poor Leslie gave me."

"Ah!"

"What do you think?"

"You must give me time to think."

Iredale's mouth was parched. His voice sounded strange in his own ears. For the moment he could scarcely realize his position. An overwhelming horror was upon him. Suddenly he turned.

"What is the date of that paper?"

"A few days before Leslie's death. But this notice has appeared many times since—which will make our task the easier."

"Yes, it will make our task the easier."

Another pause, which was protracted until the silence could almost be felt. Then Prudence spoke.

"You will stay to tea?"

Iredale pulled himself together.

"No, I think not. The storm has passed, the rain is ceasing. I had better hurry back home. It will come back on us—the storm, I mean."

The girl looked out of the window.

"Yes, I think it will. Oh, I forgot to tell you Hervey went over to see you this afternoon."

Iredale's eyes turned sharply upon the girl.

"Ah, yes, I will go at once. I will call to-morrow and see Mrs. Malling. Good-bye."

He turned away and abruptly left the room. Prudence looked after him. She saw him pass out; she saw him go out by the front door and hurry down the little path which bisected the front garden. She saw him go round to the stables, and he seemed not to heed the rain which was still falling lightly. But it was not until she saw him riding away down the trail that she realized the suddenness of his departure and the fact that he hadn't even attempted to kiss her.

Iredale's horse received little consideration at its master's hands on that homeward journey. The animal was ridden almost at racing pace over the long ten miles of country. And all the way home the words the girl had spoken were running in his ears with maddening insistence—

"And when we find the author of those words we find his murderer."

She had virtually accused him of murder. For he alone was the author of those words in the paper. Truly his sins were finding him out.

CHAPTER XIII

BLACKMAIL

As Hervey entered the valley of the ranch he listened for the warning owl cries. To-day, however, there were none. He smiled to himself as he noted the fact, for he knew their origin; he knew their object. He understood that these cries were the alarm of sentries stationed at certain points to warn those at the ranch of the approach of strangers. He knew, too, that they were used as signals for other things. And he admired the ingenuity of Iredale in thus turning the natural features of the valley to his own uses. Rain was beginning to fall in great drops, and the thunder of the rising storm had already made itself heard. He urged his horse forward.

Few men can embark on a mission of hazard or roguery without some feelings of trepidation. And Hervey was no exception to the rule. He experienced a feeling of pleasurable excitement and anticipation. There was sufficient uncertainty in his mission to make him think hard and review his powers of attack with great regard for detail. There must be no loop-hole of escape for his victim.

On the whole he was well satisfied. But he was not unprepared for failure. During his acquaintance with Iredale he had learned that the master of Lonely Ranch was not easily trifled with, neither was he the man to accept a tight situation without making a hot fight for it. It was just these things which gave Hervey the gentle qualms of excitement as he meditated upon the object of his journey. He thought of the large sums of money he had borrowed from this man, and the ease with which they had been obtained. He remembered the kindly ways and gentle manner of this reserved man, and somehow he could not get away from the thought of the velvet glove.

But even as he thought of it he laughed. There was no getting away from the facts he possessed, and if it came to anything in the shape of physical resistance, well he was not unprepared. There was a comfortable feeling about the heavy jolt of the six-chambered "lawyer" in his pocket.

The valley seemed much more lonely than usual. The horrid screeching of the watchful sentries would almost have been welcome to him. The forest was so dark and still. Even the falling raindrops and the deep rolling thunder had no power to give the place any suggestion of life. There was a mournful tone over everything that caused the rider to glance about him furtively, and wish for a gleam of the prairie sunlight.

At length he drew up at the house. There was no one about. A few cattle were calmly reposing in the corrals. There was not even the sharp bark of a dog to announce his arrival. As Hervey drew up he looked to see Iredale come to the door, for he knew the rancher had returned from his wanderings; but the front door remained shut, and, although the window of the sitting-room was wide open, there was no sign of any occupant within the room. He dismounted and stood thinking for a moment. Then he raised his voice and called to Chintz.

His summons was repeated before the man's ferret face appeared round a corner of the building. The little fellow advanced with no show of alacrity. Iredale had told him nothing about any expected visitor. He was not quite sure what to do.

By dint of many questions and replies, which took the form of nods and shakes of the head on the part of Chintz, Hervey learnt that Iredale had gone over to Loon Dyke, but that he would be back to supper.

"Then I'll wait for him," he said decidedly. "You can take my horse. I'll go inside."

The head man took the horse reluctantly and Hervey passed into the house.

For a long time he stood at the open window watching the storm. How it raged over the valley! The rain came down in one steady, hissing deluge, and the hills echoed and re-echoed with the crashing thunder. The

blinding lightning shot athwart the lowering sky till the nerves of the watcher fairly jumped at each successive flash. And he realized what a blessing the deluge of rain was in that world of resinous timber. What might have been the consequences had the storm preceded the rain? Hardened as he was to such things, even Hervey shuddered to think.

Wild as was the outlook, the waiting man's thoughts were in keeping with his surroundings, for more relentless they could not well have been. Iredale's money-bags should surely be opened for him that night before he returned home. He would levy a heavy toll for his silence.

His great dark eyes, so indicative of the unrestrained nature which was his, burned with deep, cruel fires as he gazed out upon the scene. There was a profoundness, a capacity for hellishness in their expression which scarcely belonged to a sanely-balanced mind. It was inconceivable that he could be of the same flesh and blood as his sister, and yet there was no doubt about it. Perhaps some unusually sagacious observer would have been less hard to convince. Hervey was bad, bad all through. Prudence was good. Swayed by emotion the girl might have displayed some strange, hidden, unsuspected passionate depths, as witness her feelings at her dying lover's bedside. Her rage at the moment when she realized that he had been murdered was indescribable. The hysterical sweep of passion which had moved her at that moment had been capable of tragic impulse, the consequences of which one could hardly have estimated. But her nature was thoroughly good. Under some sudden stress of emotion, which for the moment upset the balance of reason, a faint resemblance to the brother might be obtained. But while Hervey's motives would be bad, hers would have for their primary cause a purpose based upon righteousness. The man needed no incentive to sway his dispositions. He had let go his hold upon the saving rock, now he floated willingly upon the tide of his evil disposition. He preferred the broad road to Hell to the narrow path of Righteousness. It may not always have been so.

The storm abated with the suddenness of its kind.

During Hervey's long wait Chintz did not leave him entirely alone. Several times, on some trivial pretext, the little man visited the sitting-room. And his object was plainly to keep an eye upon his master's unbidden guest. At last there came a clatter of galloping hoofs splashing through the underlay of the forest, and presently Iredale pulled up at the door.

Hervey watched the rancher dismount. And his survey was in the nature of taking the man's moral measure. He looked at the familiar features which he had come to know so well; the easy, confident movements which usually characterized Iredale; the steady glance, the quiet undisturbed expression of his strong face. The watching man saw nothing unusual in his appearance, nothing to give him any clue; but Hervey was not a keen observer. Only the most apparent change would have been seen by him; the subtler indications of a disturbed mind were beyond his ken. Iredale seemed to be merely the Iredale he knew, and as he watched his lips parted with a sucking sound such as the gourmand might make in contemplating a succulent dish.

Iredale came in. Hervey met him at the door of the sitting-room, and his greeting was cordial, even effusive.

"How are you, George? I knew you were to be back to-day. Jolly glad you've returned. Quite missed you, you know. By Jove! what a storm. Wet?"

"A bit; nothing to speak of. They told me at the farm you were over here."

Iredale looked quickly round the room. His survey was not lost upon his visitor. Then he went on—

"Chintz looked after you? Had any refreshment? Whisky?"

"Chintz looked after me! He looked in every now and then to see what I was doing." Hervey laughed unpleasantly. "Yes, I can do with a gentle 'four-fingers'; thanks."

Iredale produced a decanter and glasses and a carafe of water. Then he excused himself while he went to change his clothes. While he was gone Hervey helped himself to a liberal measure of the spirit. He felt that it would be beneficial just then. His host's unconcerned

manner was a little disconcerting. The rancher seemed much harder to tackle when he was present.

Presently Iredale returned, and, seating himself in a deck-chair, produced a pipe, and pushed his tobacco-jar over to his visitor. He was wondering what Hervey had come over for. He had no wish for his company just then. He had hoped to spend this evening alone. His mind was still in a state of feverish turmoil. However, he decided that he would get rid of the man as quickly as the laws of hospitality would allow.

A silence fell whilst the rancher waited to hear the object of the visit. The other refused to smoke, but Iredale lit his pipe and smoked solemnly. His face was, if possible, more serious than usual. His eyes he kept half veiled. Hervey cast about in his mind for the opening of his attack. He seated himself on the edge of the table and looked out of the window. He raised his eyes to the leaden sky, then he withdrew his gaze and looked upon the floor. He swung one leg to and fro, as he leant sideways, and supported his attitude with a hand resting upon the table. At length, as the silence continued, and Iredale presently raised his eyes and stared straight at him, he turned to the decanter and helped himself to another drink. Then he set his glass down with a heavy hand.

"Good tack, that," he observed. "By the bye, where have all your owls departed to? Are they like the ducks, merely come, pause, and proceed on their migratory way? Or perhaps"—with a leer—"they only stand on sentry in the valley when—when you require them to."

Iredale permitted the suspicion of a smile. But there was no geniality in it; on the contrary, it was the movement of his facial muscles alone. Hervey had touched upon delicate ground.

"Did they not welcome you with their wonted acclamation?" he asked, removing his pipe from his lips, and gently pressing the ash down into the bowl with his finger-tip.

The other grinned significantly. He had plunged, and now he felt that things were easier. Besides, the spirit had warmed him.

"That's a real good game you play, George, old man. The imitation is excellent. I was deceived entirely by it. It was only the other night that I learned that those fearful screech-owls were human. Most ingenious on your part. You are well served."

Iredale never moved. He smoked quite calmly. His legs were crossed and the smile still remained about his mouth. Only his eyes changed their expression, but this was lost upon Hervey, for they were half closed.

"I don't think I quite understand. Will you explain?" The rancher spoke very deliberately, his voice was well modulated but cold.

Hervey laughed boisterously to cover a slight nervousness. This attitude of Iredale's was embarrassing. He had anticipated something different.

"Is there any need of explanation?" he asked, when his forced hilarity had abruptly terminated. "The only thing which puzzles me is that you've kept it up so long without being discovered."

There was a long pause. Then Iredale removed his pipe from his mouth, knocked it out upon the heel of his boot, and returned it to his pocket. Then he rose from his seat and stood squarely before the other.

"Don't let us beat about the bush," he said. "I think plain speaking is best—in some cases. Now, what have you to say?"

Hervey shrugged his shoulders. His dark eyes avoided the other's gaze; the steely flash in Iredale's grey eyes was hard to confront.

"A good deal," he said, with raucous intonation. "The smuggling of Chinese and consequently opium is a profitable trade. There's room for more than one in it."

"Go on."

Iredale's tone was icy.

"Of course I am not the man to blow a gaff like this. There's too much money in it, especially when worked on extensive lines, and when one is possessed of such an ideal spot as this from which to operate. That was a positive stroke of genius of yours in selecting the graveyard as a hiding-place. I suppose now that place is honeycombed with cellars for the storage of—of—

yellow. Must be, from the number of 'yellow-devils' I saw come out of the grave the other night. My, but you're slick, Iredale; slick as paint. I admire you immensely. Who'd have thought of such a thing? I tell you what, you were never intended for anything but defeating the law, George, my boy. We could do a lot together. I suppose you aren't looking for a partner?"

Iredale's face wore an almost genial expression as he replied. The rancher's tones were so cordial that Hervey congratulated himself upon the manner in which he had approached the subject.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I wasn't," he said. "As a matter of fact, you must have seen me despatching my last cargo of—yellow. Why? Were you thinking of starting in the business?"

"That *is* my intention."

"Is?"

"Yes, is." Hervey's tone was emphatic, and his attitude truculent.

"Ah! are you prepared to buy this place?" Iredale went on. "I can easily hand you over my connection."

"Buy?" Hervey thought this man was dense. "Why, I haven't two cents to my name to buy anything with. No, I don't think there will be any buying and selling between us, George Iredale."

"Then what do you propose? We may as well come to a definite arrangement."

The rancher's tone was peculiar.

"We'll run this thing for all it's worth. Hang to it as long as there's a cent to be made."

Hervey helped himself to more whisky. His self-satisfaction was immense. He had not thought that Iredale would have been so easy to handle.

"Um. A very nice, comfortable arrangement—for you." Iredale moistened his lips slowly. "You'll sup the juice while I squeeze the orange for you. No, friend Hervey, I'm not dealing."

"But you must!"

"Must?"

"Yes; don't be a fool. It means more money to you, and I shall share in the profits."

"If I wanted to make more money I could continue

in the business alone. I am not here to make money for you."

Iredale stared straight into the face before him. His grey eyes seemed to pierce through and through his companion. Hervey moved from his position. Iredale's attitude was coldly uncompromising.

"Then you refuse my offer?"

"Most emphatically."

Hervey was inclined to show his teeth. However, he checked the impulse and spoke in a conciliating tone.

"There is another alternative. Your fortune is very large. I want fifty thousand dollars."

Iredale's face relaxed into a genuine smile.

"Your demands are too modest," he said ironically. "Anything else?"

The other's eyes looked dangerous. The lurid depths were beginning to glow.

"The money I am going to have before I leave here to-night."

"Ah! blackmail. I thought so."

Iredale's contempt was biting.

"Call it what you like, Mr. George Iredale. I tell you this, you are in my power and you will have to buy my silence. You like plain speaking; and now you've got it. Refuse compliance, and I leave here to expose you."

"Pooh," said Iredale, leisurely turning to the window. "Do you think I'm a babe? How are you going to prove your charge? Why, you must be the veriest simpleton to think I am unprepared. By the time you can bring the law about me there will not remain a trace of —my work. You can never bring your charge home."

"Ah, you think not." Hervey's words sounded like a snarl. The whisky he had drunk had worked him to a proper pitch. He had not done yet. His next shot was to be a long one and a bold one, and he was not sure where it would hit. He was not sure that it might not rebound and—but his was the nature which makes for success or disaster without a second thought. For him there was no middle course. His temperament was volcanic and his actions were largely governed by the passionate nature which was his. Iredale had not

turned from the window, or he would have seen the evil working of that face. His own great, broad shoulders were set squarely before Hervey's gaze, and the uncompromising attitude only added fuel to the latter's already superheated feelings. "Perhaps you might find it interesting to know that they are hot upon the trail of the man who shot Leslie Grey."

Iredale swung round like a flash. Nor were the storm-clouds which but now frowned in the heavens more black than the expression of his face.

"You miserable hound!" he cried, his eyes sparkling, and his jaw muscles fairly quivering with the force of his clenching teeth. "What hellish crime would you attempt to fix on me now?"

Hervey grinned with all the ferocity of a tiger.

"I wish to fix no crime on you. I merely mention a fact. Leslie Grey was the only accuser of his murderer. He stated before he died that the man who inserted the notice in the paper which ran, 'Yellow booming—slump in Grey,' was the man who murdered him. I suppose you don't happen to know who was responsible for that enigmatical line? You did not inspire it?"

The look that accompanied the man's words was fiendish. The great eyes shone with a savage light. They expressed a hatred which no words could describe. Iredale's hands clenched and unclenched. His fingers seemed as though they were clutching at something which they longed to tear to atoms, and his thoughts centred upon the man before him.

Twice that day he had heard this challenge. Once uttered in all unconsciousness of its significance, but now with hideous meaning. His powers of self-restraint were great, but he had reached their limit. This man had accused him of a dastardly murder. Suddenly his voice rang out through the room like the bellow of a maddened bull. His great figure quivered with the fury of his passion. Hervey had done his worst; now he shrank before the storm he had provoked.

"Out of my house, you scum!" Iredale roared. "God! but if you stay here an instant longer, I'll smash you as I would a louse."

The rancher stood panting at the door. His flashing

eyes never left the face of the man before him. Hervey moved; he hesitated. The grin had left his face and a look of dread had replaced it. Then he moved on, forgetful of all but his moral and physical fear of the commanding figure of enraged manhood that seemed to tower over him. He even forgot the weapon which lay concealed in his pocket. He slunk on out of the door amidst a profound silence, out into the soft twilight of the valley.

The door stood open; the window stood open. Iredale looked after him. He watched the tall, drooping figure; then, as Hervey passed from view, Iredale turned back and flung himself into his chair, and his laugh sounded through the stillness of the room.

But there was no mirth in that laugh. It was like the hysterical laugh of a man whose nerves are strained to breaking tension.

He knew he had made a terrible mistake. His rage had placed a deadly weapon in his enemy's hands. He had practically admitted his authorship of the notice in the Winnipeg paper. What would be the result? he asked himself. Again that strained laugh sounded through the room.

As Hervey rode away from the valley his fear of George Iredale fell from him as might a cloak. His face wore full expression of the evil in his heart.

He, too, laughed; but his laugh was an expression of triumph.

"You're less clever than I thought, George Iredale," he muttered. "You would have done better to have bought my silence. Now I can sell my discovery elsewhere. Money I want, and money I mean to have."

But he spurred his horse on as an anxious thought came to him.

CHAPTER XIV

A STAB IN THE DARK

MRS. MALLING fumbled her glasses out of her pocket and adjusted them on her nose. She had paused in her work to receive her letters, which had just been brought from Lakeville. The girls stood by waiting to learn the news.

The summer kitchen was stifling hot. The great cook-stove, throwing off a fearful heat, helped to heighten the brilliancy of the farm-wife's complexion, and brought beads of perspiration out upon her forehead. Prudence and Alice looked cool beside "Mother Hephzy," but then they were never allowed to do any work in the kitchen. Mrs. Malling loved her kitchen better than any part of the house. She had always reigned supreme there, and as long as she could work such would always be the case.

Now she was preparing the midday meal for the threshing gang which was at work in the fields. Great blocked-tin canteens stood about upon the floor waiting to receive the hot food which was to be sent down to the workers. Hephzibah was a woman of generous instincts where the inner man was concerned. The wages she paid were always board wages, but no hired man was ever allowed to work for her and pay for his keep. She invariably insisted that every labourer should be fed from her kitchen, and she took care that his food was the best she could provide.

"Alice, girl," the old lady said, as she tore open the first letter, "go and see if Andy is hitching-up yet. Tell him that the dinner boxes will be ready in quarter-hour. Maybe you'll find him in the bean patch. I sent him to gather a peck o' broad beans. Who's this from?" she went on, turning to the last page of her letter to look at

the signature. "H'm—Winnipeg—the bank. Guess I'll read that later."

Alice ran off to find Andy, and Mrs. Malling picked up another envelope.

"Prudence, my girl," went on the farm-wife, as soon as Alice's back was turned, "just open that other," pointing to a blue envelope. "The postmark reads Ainsley. I take it, it's from young Robb Chillingwood. Maybe it's to say as he'll be along d'rectly."

Prudence picked the last letter up.

"It is hot in here, mother; I wonder you can stand it."

Her mother looked up over her spectacles.

"Stand it, child? It's a woman's place, is the kitchen. I can't trust no one at the stove but myself. I've done it for over forty summers, an' I don't reckon to give it up now. This is from that p'lice feller. He ain't doing much, I'm thinking. Seems to me he spends most of his time in making up his bills of expenses. Howsum, you look into it. What's Master Robb say?"

She put her glasses back into their broad old-fashioned case and turned back to the stove. She could never allow anything to keep her long from her cooking. She lifted a lid and stabbed her cooking fork gently into a great boiler full of potatoes. Then she passed round to the other side and shook up the fire.

"Oh, what a shame, mother! Won't Al be disappointed! Robb can't come out here, at least not to stay." Prudence had finished her letter and now looked disappointedly over at her mother.

"And how be that?" asked the old lady, standing with a shovel of anthracite coal poised in her hand.

"He says that the rush of emigrants to the district keeps him at work from daylight to dark. It's too bad. Poor old Al!"

Mrs. Malling dumped the coal into the stove with a clatter and replaced the circular iron top. She said nothing, and Prudence went on.

"He's coming out this way on business shortly, and will call over here if possible. But he can't stay. Says he's making money now, and is writing to Al and giving her all particulars. I *am* sorry he can't come."

"Well, well; maybe it's for the best," said her mother,

in a consolatory manner. "Seemingly his coming would only 'a caused bickerings with Hervey, and, good-sakes, we get enough of that now. I'm not one for underhand dealings, but I'm thinking it would be for the best not to say anything to your brother about his coming at all. If he asks, just say he can't come to stop. I'd sooner keep Hervey under my eye. If he goes off, as he said, you never know what mischief he'll be getting up to. He just goes into Winnipeg and gets around with them scallywags, and—and you never know. I have heard tell—though he never lets on—as he's too fond o' poker. Leastways, I do know as he spends more money than is good for him. Sarah and me was talking only the other day. Sarah's pretty 'cute, and she declares that he's got gaming writ in his lines. Maybe it's so. I'll not dispute. He won't have no excuse for leaving now." And she sighed heavily and took up the vegetables from the stove.

Alice returned, and the sound of wheels outside told the farm-wife that the buckboard was ready for the men's dinner.

The two girls and the old lady portioned out the food into the great canteens, and Andy lifted them on to the buckboard. Then the choreman drove away.

By the time the farm dinner was ready Alice had quite got over her disappointment. Prudence had told her the contents of the letter, and also her mother's wishes on the subject. Alice was naturally too cheerful to think much of the matter; besides, she was glad that Robb's business was improving.

Hervey came up from the fields in Andy's buckboard. He always came home for his dinner, and to-day he brought an atmosphere of unwonted cheerfulness with him. He had spent much thought and consideration upon his relations with George Iredale, and the result of his reflections was displayed in his manner when he returned from the fields. Never in his life had he held such a handful of trumps. His hand needed little playing, and the chances of a cross ruff looked to him remote.

After the meal he went out to the barn, where he smoked for awhile in pensive solitude. He thought long and earnestly, and was so absorbed that he looked up

with a start at the sound of his mother's voice calling to him from the open kitchen window.

"Bestir yourself, Hervey, boy. There's work to be done down in the fields, which is your share in the day's doings."

And the man, removing the pipe from his mouth, forgot to grumble back a rough retort, and answered quite cheerfully—

"All right, mother. Is Prudence there?"

"Where should she be, if not?" replied his mother, turning back from the window to tell his sister that she was wanted.

Prudence came out. Hervey watched her as she approached. He could not but admit to himself the prettiness of her trim figure, the quiet sedateness of her beautiful, gentle face. Gazing intently, he failed to observe the faint shadow in the expression of her soft brown eyes. There was no sympathy in his nature, and without sympathy it would have been impossible to read the expression. But Prudence was feeling a little sad and a little hurt. Iredale had not fulfilled his promise. Two days had passed since he had told her that he loved her and had asked her to be his wife; nor, since then, had he been over to the farm, nor had she heard a word from him. Fortunately, she told herself, she had said nothing of what had passed between them, not even to her friend Alice; thus she was spared the sympathy of her friends. She had waited for his coming with a world of eager delight in her heart, and each moment of the day on which he was to have come to see her mother had been one of unalloyed happiness to her. Then as the evening drew on she became anxious. And again as night came, and still no sign from him, her anxiety had given place to alarm. That night she slept little, but she kept her trouble to herself. Alice was all eagerness to ask questions of her friend, but Prudence gave her no opportunity. The next morning a note had arrived. Business detained him, but he would be over at the earliest possible moment. And now the third day was well advanced and he still remained away. She did not doubt him, but she felt hurt and a little rebellious at the thought of his allowing himself to be detained by business. Surely his first duty

was to her. It was not like him, she told herself; and she felt very unhappy.

Hervey greeted her with an assumption of kindness, almost affection.

"Are you busy, Prue? I mean, I want to have a little talk with you. I've been working in your interests lately. You may guess in what direction. And I have made a strange discovery. We haven't hit it off very well, I know, but you must forgive me my shortcomings. I have lived too long in the wilds to be a pleasant companion. Can you spare me a few minutes?"

The dark eyes of the man were quite gentle in their expression, and in the girl's present state of mind his apparent kindliness had a strong effect upon her. She was surprised, but she smiled up into his face with a world of gratitude. In spite of all, her love for her brother was very deeply rooted. The simplicity of her nature and the life she lived made her an easy victim to his villainous wiles.

"Why, yes, Hervey; as long as you like."

"Good; I'm going down to the threshing. Will you walk some part of the way with me? Mother has just reminded me that my work must not be neglected. Another two days and we shall be ready for the fall ploughing."

The sun was pouring down with fervid intensity. The yard was very still and quiet. Everything that had leisure was resting drowsily in the trifling shade obtainable. The swine had ceased to make themselves heard and were sleeping upon each other's abdomens. The fowls were scratching with ruffled feathers in the sandy hollows of the parched earth, which they had made during the hours of morning energy. The pigeons had departed for the day to the shelter of a distant bluff. Even the few horses remaining within the barn were dozing. The dog, Neche, alone seemed restless. He seemed to share with his master the stormy passions of a cruel heart, for, with infinite duplicity, he was lying low, pretending to be occupied with a great beef shin-bone, while his evil eyes watched intently the movements of half-a-dozen weary milch cows, which were vainly endeavouring to reach the shelter of their sheds. But the dog would not have it.

With a refinement of torture he would allow them to mouch slowly towards their yard, then, just as they were about to enter, he would fly into a dreadful passion, and, limping vigorously at their heels, would chase them out upon the prairie and then return once more to his bone, only to await his opportunity of repeating the operation.

Hervey and Prudence moved away and passed down the trail. Neche reluctantly left his bone—having satisfied himself in a comprehensive survey that no canine interloper was about who could steal his treasure during his absence—and followed them. He walked beside the girl without any sign of pleasure. He was a dog that seemed to find no joy in his master's or mistress's company. He seemed to have no affection in him, and lived a life of mute protest.

Hervey did not speak for a few minutes. It was Prudence who broke the silence.

"I suppose it is something to do with Leslie's death that you want to talk to me about. I wondered what your object was when you questioned me so closely upon his dying words. Have you discovered a fresh clue?"

"Something more than a fresh clue." Hervey had relapsed into his old moroseness.

"Ah!" The girl's face lit with an almost painful eagerness. For a moment her own immediate troubles were forgotten. A wild feeling surged up in her heart which set the blood tingling in her veins, and she waited almost breathlessly for her brother's next words.

Hervey displayed no haste. Rather he seemed as though he would gain time.

"That message or advertisement in the paper. Did you ever attempt to fathom its meaning? It was something of a puzzle."

Prudence gazed up at the dark face beside her. Hervey was looking down upon the dusty trail. His look was one of profound thought. In reality he was calculating certain chances.

"I tried, but failed dismally. To me it conveyed nothing beyond the fact that its author shot Leslie."

"Just so. But before I tell you what I have discovered you must understand the argument. That line contained a message, a message so significant that once read with

understanding the mystery of Grey's death became one that a child might solve."

"Yes—yes. But the reading of it," Prudence exclaimed impatiently.

"It is intelligible to me."

"And——"

It was a different girl to the one we have hitherto seen who awaited the man's next words. The old, gentle calmness, the patient, even disposition had given place to a world of vengeful thought. There was a look in those usually soft brown eyes which bore a strange resemblance to her brother's. A moment had arrived in her life when circumstances aroused that other side of her character of which, perhaps, even she had been ignorant. She learned now of her own capacity for hatred and revenge. Some preliminary warnings of these latent passions had been given when Grey had died, but the moment had passed without full realization. Now she felt the ruthless sway of a wave of passionate hatred which seemed to rise from somewhere in her heart and creep over her faculties, locking her in an embrace in which she felt her good motives and love being crushed out of all recognition. There could be no doubt as to the resemblance between these two people in that one touch of nature. Hervey was a long time in answering. He had not only to tell her of his discovery, but there were his personal interests to consider. He wished to re-assure himself of his own advantage.

"See here, Prue, what are you offering—or rather, is mother offering—to that detective chap if he discovers the murderer of Grey? Let us quite understand one another. I don't intend to part with my discovery for nothing. I want money as badly as anybody can want it. For a consideration I'll tell you, and prove to you, who murdered your man. Provided, of course, the consideration is sufficiently large. Otherwise I say nothing."

For a moment Prudence looked up from beneath her sun-bonnet into her brother's face. The scorn in her look was withering. She had long since learned the selfish nature of this man, but she had not realized the full depths to which he had sunk until now. He would sell his infor-

mation. And the thought scorched her brain with its dreadful significance.

"How much will buy you?" she asked at last. And words fail to express the contempt she conveyed in her tone.

Hervey laughed in a hollow fashion.

"You don't put it nicely," he said. "Ah, how much will buy me?" he added thoughtfully.

"When a man chooses the methods of Judas it seems to me there need be no picking or choosing of words. What do you want? How much?"

His answer came swiftly. He spoke eagerly, and his tone was quite different from that which his companion was used to. It was as if some deep note in his more obscure nature had been struck, and was now making itself heard above the raucous jangling of discord by which his life was torn. His words were almost passionate, and there was a ring of truth in them which was astonishing, coming from such a man.

"Look here, Prue, I want to get away from here. I want to get out upon the world again, alone, to make my life what I choose. I can't stand this place; the quiet surroundings; the people with whom I come in contact. It isn't living; it's existence, and a hellish one at that. Look around; prairie—nothing but prairie. In the winter, snow, endless snow; in the summer, the brown, scorched prairie. The round of unrelieved, monotonous labour. Farming; can mind of man conceive a life more deadly? No—no! I want to get away from it all; back to the life in which I was my own master, unfettered by duties and distasteful labours for which I am responsible to others. From the beginning my life has been a failure. But that was not originally my fault. I worked hard, and my ideals were sound and good. Then I met with misfortune. My life was my own to make or mar after that; what I chose to do with it was my own concern. But here I do not live. I want the means to get away; to make a fresh start in different surroundings. Sooner or later I must go, or I shall become a raving maniac. You can help me in this, even as I can help you in the cause in which you are now spending and wasting a lot of money. Get mother to give me fifteen thousand dollars, not only as the price

of my information but also to help me, as your brother, to make another start. I am not wanted here, neither do I want to remain."

He ceased speaking. The truth had died out of his tone when he mentioned the money, and his words were the specious wheedling of one who knows the generous kindliness of those with whom he is dealing. But Prudence gave no heed to anything but that which found an answering chord in the passionate emotion which swayed her. Hervey's appeal to get away drew from her some slight proportion of sympathetic understanding, but her main feeling was a desire to learn the truth which he had discovered.

"Yes, yes; but the clue—discovery."

"First, the money. First, you must show me that you will do this thing for me."

"I can only answer for myself. I can promise nothing in mother's name."

"Yes, but for yourself. You have an interest in the farm."

"Yes, I will give you all I have—all—all—if you can prove to me, and in a court of law, who was the man who shot Leslie Grey. I have saved nearly everything I have made out of creamery. It is not as large a sum as you require, but I can raise the rest from mother. You shall have all you ask if you can tell me this thing. But bear this in mind, Hervey, you will have to prove your words. I give you my word of honour that the money will be forthcoming when you have accomplished this thing."

Prudence spoke earnestly. But there was caution in what she said. She did not trust her brother. And though she was ready to pay almost anything for the accomplishment of her purpose, she was not going to allow herself to be tricked.

Hervey didn't like these stipulations. He had calculated to extort a price for his information only. The proving of his charge was a matter which would entail time and trouble and something else which he did not care to contemplate; besides, he wanted to get away. His recollection of his recent interview with Iredale was still with him. And he remembered well the rancher's attitude. It struck him that George Iredale would fight hard to prove his innocence. He wondered uncomfortably if

he could establish it. No, he must make a better bargain than the girl offered.

"See here, Prue, this is a matter of business. There is no sentiment in it as far as I am concerned. Your conditions are too hard. You pay me half the money down when I give you the story. You can pay the rest when I have carried out your further conditions. It is only fair. Establishing a case in the law courts is a thing that takes time. And, besides, I have known guilty people to get off before now. I can convince you of the truth of my case. A jury is different."

Prudence thought for a moment. They were already within earshot of the thresher. And the droning of the machine and the jerky spluttering of the traction engine sounded pleasantly in the sultry atmosphere. The dog hobbled lazily at her heels, nor did he show the least sign of interest in his surroundings. The wagons loaded with bountiful sheaves were drawing up to the thresher from half-a-dozen directions, whilst those already emptied were departing for fresh supplies. Everywhere was a wondrous peace; only in those two hearts was an ocean of unrest.

"Very well. If you can convince me, it shall be as you say. You shall have the money. The rest shall remain until after the jury's verdict. I am not prepared to give you the money I have saved for any tale you choose to concoct. Now let me have your story. You have shown me too much of your sordid craving to make me a ready believer."

"You will believe me before I have finished, Prue," the man retorted, with a bitter laugh. "You will find corroboration for what I have to tell in your own knowledge of certain facts."

"So much the better for you. Go on."

In spite of her cautious words Prudence waited with nerves tingling and with rapidly beating heart for her brother's story. She did not know herself. She did not understand the feelings which swayed her. Hervey had an easier task than either of them believed. Of late she had dwelt so long—so intently—upon the matter under discussion that she was ready to believe almost anything which offered a solution to the ghastly mystery. But she did not know this. Hervey told his story with all the

cunning of a man who appreciates the results which attach to the effects of his words. He lost no detail which could further his ends.

"Grey, on his deathbed, alluded to the notice in the paper. He did so in answer to your question as to who had shot him?"

"Yes."

"He was perfectly conscious?"

"Yes."

"Some time before he died you and he had discussed this notice, and he told you he was meditating a coup in which that notice had afforded him his principal clue." The girl nodded, and Hervey went on. "Grey was a Customs officer. All his work centred round contraband. No other work came into his sphere of operations. Very well, the clue which that notice afforded had to do with some illicit traffic. The question is, What was the nature of that traffic? Here is the obvious solution. 'Yellow booming.' What traffic is known by such a title as 'Yellow' in this country? There is only one. Traffic in Chinese! The smuggling of Chinese across the border. And this traffic was booming. Operations were being successfully carried out. Where? The rest is easy. Somewhere in Grey's district. 'Slump in Grey' could only mean, under the circumstances, that Grey's supervision was avoided; that the work was carried out in spite of him. You know—everybody knows that Chinese are smuggled into Canada at many points along the border, and that opium is brought in at the same time. Thus the poll tax and the opium tax are avoided by men who make a living out of this traffic. The profit is worth the risk. There is a fortune in smuggling opium. The authorities are endeavouring to put it down. It is well known that our cities are swarming with Chinese for whom no poll tax has been paid. And yet the legitimate importation of opium does not increase. Rather has it decreased in consequence of the prohibitive tax imposed upon it. Still, these Chinese must have their opium. This then was the coup poor Grey meditated. He had discovered a hot-bed of opium smuggling. If he succeeded in rounding the smugglers up, it meant a great deal to his future prospects. Is that all plain?"

"Yes, yes; go on."

The girl's eyes were gleaming strangely. She followed every word her brother said with an intentness which boded well for the result of his efforts. The careful array of arguments was speciously detailed. Now she waited for what was still to come without any attempt at concealing her impatience. For the time everything was forgotten while she learned of the murderer of her first love. The peaceful scene about her was set before eyes which no longer gazed with intelligence upon their surroundings. She was back in the farm parlour listening to Leslie's story of his hopes—his aspirations. Every detail of that evening was brought vividly back to her memory. She remembered, too, that that was the night on which Hervey had returned. There was a significance in the thought that was not lost upon her.

Hervey had come to a stand, and Prudence placed herself before him. Neche squatted beside her, and as he sat his head reached up to her waist.

"Very well. The question alone remains, who along the border in this part of the country is smuggling Chinese? And having found your man, did he insert the notice in question?"

"Yes—and you——"

"Chance pointed out the man to me. And I have ascertained the rest."

"And who is the murderer of Leslie?"

There was an impressive pause. Hervey gazed down into the eager upturned face. The dog beside the girl moved restlessly, and as he moved he made a curious whining noise. His nose was held high in the air, and his greenish eyes looked up towards the spotless sun-bonnet.

"The owner of Lonely Ranch. George Iredale!"

Hervey turned abruptly away. Neche had moved a little way back along the trail and stood looking about him. Then out on the still air rang a piercing, hysterical laugh. And Prudence stretched out her arm and clutched at the barbed-wire fence-post as though her mirth had overcome her.

Hervey looked sharply round upon her. Neche gave a low growl, the noise seemed to have offended him; then he limped off down the trail back to the house.

CHAPTER XV

THE MAGGOT AT THE CORE

HERVEY'S look of surprise quickly changed to one of displeasure. To him his sister's attitude merely suggested incredulity, nothing more.

"Well?" he said at last, as her laugh died out suddenly.

Prudence turned upon him with a strange fierceness.

"Go on. You must tell me more than that to convince me. George Iredale—smuggler, murderer! You must be mad!"

Hervey kept himself well in hand. He was playing for a great stake. He would lose nothing through any ill-advised bluster.

"I was never more sane in my life," he answered coldly. "I am ready to prove my words."

"Prove them."

Prudence's face and the tone of her voice were icy. Her mouth was set firmly, the declined corners testifying to the hard setting of her jaws. She looked straight into her brother's face with an intentness which made him lower his eyes. He had no conception of the fires which he had stirred within her. One unconquerable desire swayed her. This man must tell her all he knew. Then she would refute every word, tell him what manner of man he was, and have him driven from the farm. She hated him at that moment as she might hate a rattlesnake. She was filled with a longing to strike him, her own brother, to the earth.

Hervey spoke in measured, even tones.

"You know the ranch and its surroundings well. You have been there. You have heard the so-called owl cries which greet the visitor upon entering the valley. Those are not owl cries at all, but the work of human sentries

always on the watch, ready to give immediate alarm at the approach of danger. The secret of the ranch lies in the graveyard." Prudence started. "That is where I made my first discovery, a discovery of which I should not have understood the significance but for your experiences when picnicking in that region two or three days before. At the time I speak of I had come upon the cemetery for the first time. I had Neche with me. I paused at the broken fence which surrounded it, and surveyed the overgrown graves. While I did so, Neche mouched about among them with canine inquisitiveness. Suddenly he became agitated, and showed signs of having hit upon a hot scent. I watched him curiously. He ran up a path and then paused at one of the stone-marked graves. Here he began to tear wildly at the edge of it. I followed him up and saw that he had dug a hole below the stone. I dragged him away, and found that beneath the stone the grave was hollow. Then I moved hastily away, and, taking the dog to the ruined dead-house, put him on the scent again. He dashed in, whining excitedly as he went. It was while I stood watching for his return that I discovered the most significant point. Directly under my feet, somewhere under the ground, I heard a sound of hammering. Then I knew that the graveyard was no longer the resting-place of the dead, but the abode of the living. Instantly I remembered all the details of your ghost story, and determined to witness for myself the scenes you had observed. Settle it for once and all in your mind. I was troubled with no superstitious fears upon the matter. I guessed the truth." Hervey broke off, but resumed quickly. "That evening I returned to the graveyard surreptitiously, and took up a position in the black shelter of the surrounding woods. I saw all you saw. But the robed figures were not the ghosts which you thought them to be; they were Chinese, carrying their boxes and bundles of personal luggage, and, I have no doubt, a cargo of opium. Then I understood that the graveyard was honeycombed with cellars, and that this place formed the central depôt of Iredale's traffic and his distributing station. I can understand how these 'yellow-devils' are distributed by means of loaded hayricks and such things. The point I have not fathomed is the means

by which the 'goods' are brought into the country. I suggest the only means I can think of as being almost without risk, and that is the lake."

Hervey paused to watch the effect of his story. Prudence gave no sign. She no longer looked at her companion, but away across the harvested fields in the direction of Iredale's ranch. As he waited for her comment her lips moved.

"Go on," was all she said; and the man proceeded.

"It was an unconscious expression which, in the first flush of discovery, I made use of which ultimately gave me a clue to the rest. As realization of Iredale's doings came to me I thought of the notorious 'Traffic in Yellow.' That night I pondered long over the whole thing. I had learned to like Iredale better than any man I have ever known. He had always seemed such an honest, straightforward man. And all of you folks were so fond of him. It was a painful awakening; but there was worse to come, for, as I lay awake thinking, there flashed through my brain the recollection of what you had told me of Grey's death and his reference to the notice in the paper. Instantly the interpretation of that line came to me. It related to the yellow traffic. And I shuddered as I reviewed the possibilities which my discovery opened up. I couldn't rest. A feverish desire to know the worst assailed me. I questioned you as you may remember, and, with every reply you gave me, me fears received confirmation. In the end I could no longer keep silence, and my anger drove me to a course which I have since almost regretted, for it has destroyed the last vestige of the regard I entertained for the man you have all so liked and respected. I went over to the ranch and challenged George Iredale——"

"On the night of the storm. The night he visited me. Go on." Prudence's face was ghastly in its pallor. She gave no other sign of emotion.

"Yes, on the night of the storm. I taxed him with smuggling. He admitted it. I taxed him with the authorship of that notice——"

"Well?" The girl leant forward in her eagerness.

"He did not contradict it. His attitude was a tacit admission. That is my evidence."

Hervey ceased speaking, and a long pause followed. The man waited. He did not wish to hurry her. He was not blind to the fact that she regarded Iredale with something more than mere friendly feeling, and, with fiendish cunning, he had played upon the knowledge by his allusions to his own regard for the man and the trust which they all placed in him. This woman's love for Iredale he knew would help him; for, gradually, as the damning evidence he had produced filtered through her armour of loyal affection, her hatred for the man would be doubled and trebled. In this Hervey displayed a knowledge of human nature which one would scarcely have credited him with.

At last Prudence turned. The pallor of her face was unchanged. Only the look in her eyes had altered. The horror which had shone there had become a world of piteous appeal. All her soul shone forth in those sweet, brown eyes. Surely it must have needed a heart of stone to resist her. Her body was leaning forward, her two brown hands were held out towards him.

"I don't believe it! I can't believe it! George is no —murderer."

Hervey's great eyes lowered before that heartful look. His face was a study in hopelessness. From his expression of deep sorrow Iredale might have been his own brother who was accused of murder.

"I'm afraid there is no hope of what you say, Prue. Leslie was conscious; he knew what he was saying. *Iredale had every reason for shooting him.* The circumstantial evidence is damning. The most sceptical jury would be convinced."

"O God! O God! And he has asked me to be his wife." Prudence covered her face with her hands, and her body heaved with great, passionate sobs.

Hervey started at the words. His face lit up with a wicked joy. This was better than he had expected. George should pay dearly for his refusal to buy his silence.

"You say he dared to propose to you with that foul crime upon his soul? He is a worse villain than I had believed. By heavens, he shall swing for his crime! I had hoped that my news had come in time to save you

this cruel wrong. The scum! The foul, black-hearted scum!"

Hervey's rage was melodramatic. But the girl, even in the depths of her misery and distraught feelings, was impressed. Her heart cried out for her lover, and proclaimed his innocence in terms which would not be silenced. His image rose before her mind's eye, and she looked upon that kindly, strong face, the vigorous bearing of that manly figure, and the story she had just listened to became dwarfed as her faith in him rose superior to the evidence of her senses. It could not be. Her quivering lips struggled to frame the words she longed to utter, but no sound came. Hervey's words, his attitude, his appearance of deep, honest sorrow for his sister paralyzed her faculties and hope died down in her heart.

The man moved forward to her side, and touched her gently on the shoulders.

"Come, Prue, we had best go back to the house. I can do no work to-day. You, too, need quiet for reflection. The heartless villain!" And he harped upon the information his sister had provided him with.

Prudence allowed herself to be led. She did not care whither she went or what happened. She was incapable of reasoning. She was stunned by the cruel blow that had fallen. Later she would recover herself, for all such blows are but passing; in waking moments mind and reason cannot long remain inert and sanity obtain. For the present she was a mere automaton.

Hervey grew uncomfortable at the girl's prolonged silence. He cared nothing for her feelings; he cared nothing for the heart he had broken. He cared only for the money he had not yet secured. He realized only too well that, whatever protest his sister might offer, he had convinced her of Iredale's guilt; it was only a question of time before she admitted it openly. But some feeling of doubt prompted him to secure his wage without delay. Thus his greed rushed him on to a false trail.

Halfway to the house he broke the silence.

"Well, Prue, you cannot refute my evidence. Iredale is the man you have all been seeking. I have served you well. You yourself have escaped a course which would have brought you lifelong regret. Think of it! What

would it have meant to you had you married the man? Terrible! Terrible!"

The girl looked up. There was a wild, hunted look in her eyes. Her brother's words had in some way driven her at bay. He had struck a chord which had set her every nerve on edge, and in doing so had upset all his best-laid schemes. A flood of passionate protest surged to her lips and flowed forth in a seething torrent. She remembered what his story had been told for; she had forgotten for the moment, so well had he acted his part, and had thought only that what he had said was the outcome of his regard for her. Now she turned upon him like a tigress.

"Judas!" she cried, a flush of rage sweeping up into her face as the words hissed from between her teeth. "You have come to sell this man. Your thoughts have nothing to do with the meting out of human justice. You want a price for your filthy work. I loathe you! What curse is on our family that you should have been born into it? You shall have your money; do you hear? You shall have it, and with it goes my curse. But not yet. My conditions are not fulfilled. I do not believe you; your story has not convinced me; I can see no reason in it. Ha, ha!" and she laughed hysterically. "You cannot make me believe it because I will not. You shall have your money, I will not go back on my word; but you must fulfil the conditions. You must convince me of the reason in your story. You will earn your pay as you have never earned anything in your life. Shall I tell you how you will earn it? You will prove your story before judge and jury. When you have convinced them you will have convinced me. Then I will pay you. My God, what taint has brought such blood into the veins of our flesh? If Iredale is the murderer he shall pay the extreme penalty, and you—whether you like it or not—shall be instrumental in that punishment. You shall be his accuser; you shall see him to the scaffold. And after it is over, after you have received the sum of your blood-money, I will tell the world of your doings. That you—my brother—demanded a price for your work. They—the world—shall know you; shall loathe you as I loathe you. You shall be an outcast wherever you go, stamped with the brand of Judas—the most despised of all men. Better for

you if you stood in George Iredale's place on the scaffold than face the world so branded. Oh, you wretched man, you have destroyed my life—my all! Go, and bring the police. Go to those whose duty it is to listen to such stories as yours. Now I will drive you to it; you shall go, whether you like it or not. Refuse, and I will lay the information and force you to become a witness. You thought you were dealing with a soft, silly woman; you thought to cajole the price out of me, and then, having obtained what you desired, to leave me to do the work. Fool! You will face George Iredale, the accuser and the accused. You shall earn your money. I know the ways of such men as you. Do you know what you are doing? Do you know the name that such work as yours goes by? It is blackmail!"

The girl paused for breath. Then she went on with a bitterness that was almost worse than the contempt in all she had said before.

"But rest content. Every penny you have asked for shall be yours when Iredale's crimes are expiated. Nor shall I give to the world the story of my brother's perfidy until such time as you have gone out of our world for ever. Go, go from me now: I will not walk beside you."

Hervey's face was a study in villainous expression as he listened to his sister's hysterical denunciation. He knew the reason of her tirade. He knew that she loved Iredale. He had convinced her of this lover's crimes; he knew this. And now, woman-like, she turned upon him—for his hand, his words had destroyed her happiness. But her words smote hard. The lowest natures care not what others think of them, but those others' spoken thoughts have a different effect. So it was with Hervey. It mattered nothing to him what the girl thought of him—what the world thought of him. But words—abuse—had still power to move him.

She struck the right note when she said the money down was what he wanted. Now he saw that he had over-reached himself, and he cursed himself for having trusted to a woman's promise. There was but one thing left for him to do. He controlled himself well when he replied.

"Very well, sister," he said. "In spite of what you

say, you are going back on your word. You should have thought to fling dirt before you entered into a compact with me. However, I care nothing for all your threats. As you have said, I want money. Nothing else matters to me. So I will go to Winnipeg and see this thing through."

"You certainly will have to do so. Andy shall drive you into town to-night, and I could find it in my heart to wish that I might never see your face again."

"Very well." Hervey laughed harshly. "As you wish. I accept your commands. See you as readily fulfil your part of the contract when the time comes. You do not hoodwink me again with impunity."

And so brother and sister parted. The girl walked on to the house, her feet dragging wearily over the dusty trail. Hervey paused irresolutely. His burning eyes, filled with a look of bitter hatred, gazed after the slight figure of his sister, whose life he had so wantonly helped to wreck. Then he laughed cruelly and turned abruptly back on his tracks and returned once more to the harvesters.

Prudence gained the house and went straight to her room. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to straighten out the chaos of her thoughts. She heard the cheery voices of her mother and Alice talking in the kitchen. She heard the clatter of plates and dishes, and she knew that these two were washing up. But beyond that she noticed nothing; she did not even see the plump figure of Sarah Gurridge approaching the house from the direction of Leonville.

Once in her own little room she flung herself into an arm-chair and sat staring straight in front of her. Her paramount feeling was one of awful horror. The mystery was solved, and George Iredale was the murderer. The metal alarm clock ticked away upon the wooden top of her bureau, and the sound pervaded the room with its steady throb. Her feelings, her thoughts, seemed to pulsate in concert with its rhythm. The words which expressed her dominant emotions hammered themselves into her brain with the steady precision of the ticking—

"George Iredale, the murderer of Leslie Grey!"

The moments passed, but time brought the girl no relief.

All thought of the man who had told her of this thing had passed from her. Only the fact remained. Slowly, as she sat with nerves tingling and whirling brain, a flush of blood mounted to her head, her brain became hot, and she seemed to be looking out on a red world. The ticking of the clock grew fainter and more distant. The room seemed to diminish in size, while the objects about her drew nearer and nearer. A sense of compression was hers, although she seemed to be gazing out over some great distance with everything around her in due perspective.

Mechanically she rose and opened the window; then she returned to her chair with something of the action of an automaton.

And as she sat the blood seemed to recede from her brain and an icy dew broke out upon her forehead. She was numbed with a sort of paralysis now, and the measured beat of the clock no longer pounded out the words of her thought. Only her heart beat painfully, and she was conscious of a horrible void. Something was wrong with her, but she was incapable of realizing what it was.

She moved, the chair creaked under her, and again thought flowed through her brain. It came with a rush; the deadly numbness had gone as quickly as it had come, and once more her faculties worked feverishly. Now she realized pain, horror, despair, hopelessness in a sudden, overwhelming flood. She shrank back into the chair as though to avoid physical blows which were being rained upon her by some unseen hand.

Presently she started up with a faint cry. She walked across the room and back again. She paused at the bureau, muttering—

"It can't be! It can't be!" she said to herself, in an agony of terror. "George is too good, too honest. Ah!"

Her love cried out for the man, but reason checked her while her heart tried to rush her into extravagant hopefulness. Iredale had admitted the smuggling. She had seen with her own eyes the doings at the graveyard. And therein lay the key to everything. Leslie had said so with his dying breath. But as this thought came to her it was chased away by her love in a fresh burst of fervour. She could not believe it. There must be some awful, some horrible mistake.

Slowly her mind steadied itself; the long years of calmness which she had spent amidst the profound peace of the prairie helped her. She gripped herself lest the dreadful thought of what she had heard should drive her to madness. She went over what she had been told with a keen examination. She listened to her own arguments for and against the man she loved. She went back to the time when Leslie had told her of his "coup." She remembered everything so well. She paused as she recollected her dead lover's anger at George's coming to the party. And, for a moment, her heart almost stood still. She asked herself, had she misinterpreted his meaning? Had there been something underlying his expressed displeasure at George's coming which related to what he knew of his, George Iredale's, doings at the ranch? Every word he had said came back to her. She remembered that he had finished up his protest with a broken sentence.

"And besides——"

There was a significance in those words now which she could not help dwelling upon. Then she put the thought from her as her faith in her lover reasserted itself. But the effort was a feeble one; her love was being overwhelmed by the damning evidence.

She moved restlessly from the bureau to the window. The curtained aperture looked out upon the far-reaching corn-fields, which were now only a mass of brown stubble. In the distance, beyond the dyke, she could see the white steam of the traction-engine and the figures of many men working. The carts and racks were moving in the picture, but for all else the view was one of peaceful, unbroken calm.

Her mind passed on to the time when the party had broken up. She remembered how in searching for Iredale she had found the two men quarrelling, or something in that nature. Again Leslie had been on the verge of telling her something, but the moment had gone by and he had kept silence. She tried to deny the significance of these things, but reason checked her, and her heart sank to zero. And she no longer tried to defend her lover.

Then came the recollection of that picnic. The screech-owls; the boats laden with their human freight moving

suspiciously over the waters of the great lake. She thought of the graveyard and the ghostly procession. And all the time her look was hardening and the protests of her heart slowly died out. If she had doubted Hervey's words, all these things of which she now thought were facts evident to her own senses. The hard light in her eyes changed to the bright flash of anger. This man had come to her with his love, she reminded herself, and she had yielded to him all that she had power to bestow. The brown eyes grew darker until their glowing depths partially resembled those of her brother.

As the anger in her heart rose her pain increased, and she recoiled in horror at the thought that this man had dared to offer her his love while his hands were stained with black crime. At best he was a law-breaker; at the worst he was——

She paced her room with agitated steps. The blood rose to her head again, and she felt dizzy and dazed. What could she do? What must she do? She longed for some one to whom she could tell all that was in her heart, but she could not speak of it—she dared not. She felt that she must be going mad. Through all her agony of mind she knew that she loved this man who was—a murderer.

She told herself that she hated him, and she knew that she lied to deceive herself. No, no, he was not guilty. He had not been proved guilty, and no man is guilty until he is proved so. Thoughts crowded thick and fast on her sorely-taxed brain, and again and again her hands went up to her head with the action of one who is mentally distracted. But in spite of the conflict that raged within her the angry light in her eyes grew, and a look which was out of all keeping with the sweet face was slowly settling itself upon her features. Again she cried in her heart, "What shall I do?"

Suddenly a light broke through her darkness and revealed to her a definite course. This man must not be judged, at least by her, without a hearing. Why should she not go to him? Why not challenge him with the story? If he were the murderer, perhaps he would strike her to the earth, and add her to the list of his victims. She laughed bitterly. It would be good to die by his hand,

she thought. Under any circumstances life was not worth living. The thought fascinated her. Yes, she would do it. Then her spirit of justice rose and rebelled. No. He would then go unpunished. Leslie's death would remain unavenged. The murderer would have triumphed.

She thought long; she moved wildly about the room. And as the hours passed a demon seemed to come to her and take hold of her. It was the demon which looked out of her brother's eyes, and which now looked out of hers. He whispered to her, and her willing ears listened to all he said. Her heart, torn by conflicting passions, drank in the cruel promptings.

"Why not kill him? Why not kill him?" suggested the demon. "If he is guilty, kill him, and your life will not have been lived in vain. If he be a murderer it were but justice. You will have fulfilled your promise of vengeance. After that you could turn your hand against yourself."

And her heart echoed the question, "Why not?"

For nearly an hour she continued to pace her room. Yes, yes! Hers was the right, she told herself. If he were the murderer she did not care to live. They should die together; they should journey beyond together. She thought over all the details, and all the time the demon looked out of her eyes and jogged her with fresh arguments when her heart failed her. She knew where her brother kept his pistols. She would wait until he had set out for Winnipeg. Then, on the morrow, she would ride over to Lonely Ranch.

She nursed her anger; she encouraged it at every turn. And she longed for the morrow. But outwardly she grew calm. Only her eyes betrayed her. And they were not the eyes of perfect sanity. They glowed with a lurid fire, the fire which shone in the fierce, dark eyes of her brother.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ECHO FROM THE ALASKAN MOUNTAINS

ALICE searched all over the farm for her friend. The last place in which she thought of looking was the little bedroom the two girls shared. Here at length she arrived, and a shock awaited her.

Prudence was sitting beside the window. She was gazing out at the bare, harvested fields, nor did she turn at her friend's approach. It was not until Alice spoke that she looked round.

"Here you are, Prue! Why, whatever is the matter?" she exclaimed, as she noted the grey pallor of the face before her; the drawn lines about the mouth, the fiercely burning eyes. "You poor soul, you are ill; and you never told me a word about it. I have been looking everywhere for you. It is tea-time. What is it, dear?"

"Do I look ill?" Prudence asked wearily. She passed her hand across her forehead. She was almost dazed. Then she went on as she turned again to the window: "I'm all right; my head is aching—that's all. I don't think I want any tea." The next moment she was all alertness. "Has Hervey returned from the fields?"

"Hervey? Yes; why? He's returned and gone away again; gone into Winnipeg. He nearly frightened poor mother Hephzy out of her wits. Came in all of a sudden and declared he must hurry off to Winnipeg at once, and he wanted Andy to drive him. You know his way. He wouldn't give any explanation. He was like a bear to his mother. My fingers were just itching to slap his face. But come along, dear, you must have some tea. It'll do your head good."

While she was speaking Alice's eyes never left her friend's face. There was something about Prudence's expression she didn't like. Her mind at once reverted to thoughts of fever and sunstroke and such things, but she said nothing that might cause alarm. She merely persisted when the other shook her head.

Eventually her persuasions prevailed.

"Mother Hephzy's fretting away down-stairs and Sarah is backing her up. The long-suffering Mary has been catching it in consequence. So come along and be your most cheerful self, Prue. The poor old dears must be humoured."

And Alice with gentle insistence led her companion down to the parlour.

"And where, miss, have you been all this precious time?" asked Mrs. Malling, when the two girls reached the parlour. "Sleeping, I'll be bound, to judge by them spectacles around your eyes. There's no git-up about young folk now-a-days," she went on, turning to Sarah. "Six hours' sleep for healthy-minded women, I says; not an hour more nor an hour less. Sister Emma was allus one o' them for her sy-esta." Then she turned back to Prudence. "Maybe she learned you, my girl."

"I haven't been sleeping, mother," Prudence protested, taking her place at the table. "I don't feel very well."

"Ah, you don't say so," exclaimed the old lady, all anxiety at once. "An' why didn't you tell me before? Now maybe you've got a touch o' the sun?"

"Have you been faint and giddy?" asked Sarah, fixing her quiet eyes upon the girl's face.

"No, I don't think so. I've got a headache—nothing more."

"Ah; cold bath and lemon soda," observed her mother practically.

"Tea, and be left alone," suggested Sarah.

> "'Nature designs all human ills, but in the making
> Suggests the cure which best is for the taking.'"

Her steady old eyes seemed able to penetrate mere outward signs.

"Quite right, 'Aunt' Sarah," said Alice decidedly. "Leave the nostrums and quackeries alone. Prue will be all right after a nice cup of tea. Now, mother Hephzy, one of your best for the invalid, and, please, I'll have some more ham."

"That you shall, you flighty harum-scarum. And to think o' the likes o' you dictating to me about nostrums and physickings," replied the farm-wife, with a comfortable laugh. "I'll soon be having Mary teaching me to toss a buckwheat 'slap-jack.' Now see an' cut from

the sides o' that ham where the curin's primest. I do allow as the hams didn't cure just so, last winter. Folks at my board must have of the best."

"I never knew any one to get anything else here," laughed Alice. Then she turned her head sharply and sat listening.

Mrs. Malling looked over towards the window. Prudence silently sipped her tea, keeping her eyes lowered as much as possible. She knew that, in spite of their talk, these kindly people were worried about her, and she tried hard to relieve their anxiety.

"Some one for us," said Alice, as the sound of horse's hoofs came in through the open window.

"Some one from Lakeville, I expect," said Mrs. Malling, making a guess.

"That's George Iredale's horse," said Sarah, who had detected the sound of a pacer's gait.

Prudence looked up in a startled, frightened way. Sarah was looking directly at her. She made no further comment aloud, but contented herself with a quiet mental note.

"Something wrong," she thought; "and it's to do with him. Poor child, poor child. Maybe she's fretting herself because——"

Her reflections were abruptly broken off as the sound of a man's voice hailing at the front door penetrated to the parlour.

"Any one in?" cried the voice; and instantly Alice sprang to her feet.

"It's Robb!" she exclaimed. There was a clatter as her chair fell back behind her; she nearly fell over it, reached the door, and the next moment those in the parlour heard the sound of joyous exclamations proceeding from the hall.

Prudence's expression was a world of relief. Her mother was overjoyed.

"This is real good. Bring him in! Bring him in, Miss Thoughtless! Don't keep him there a-philandering when there's good fare in the parlour!"

> "'Love feeds on kisses, we read in ancient lay,
> Meaning the love of yore, not of to-day,'"

murmured Sarah, with a pensive smile, while she turned expectantly to greet the visitor.

Radiant, her face shining with conscious happiness,

Alice led her fiancé into the room. And Robb Chillingwood found himself sitting before the farm-wife's generous board almost before he was aware of it. While he was being served he had to face a running fire of questions from, at least, three of the ladies present.

Robb was a cheerful soul and ever ready with a pleasant laugh. This snatched holiday from a stress of underpaid work was like a "bunk" to a school-boy. It was more delightful to him by reason of the knowledge that he would have to pay up for it afterwards with extra exertions and overtime work.

"You didn't tell us when you were coming," said Alice.

"Didn't know myself. Thought I'd ride over from Iredale's place on spec'."

"And you're come from there now?" asked Mrs. Malling.

Prudence looked up eagerly.

"Yes; I've just bought all his stock for a Scotch client of mine."

"Scotch?" Sarah turned away with a motion of disgust.

"What, has George sold all his beasties at last?" exclaimed the farm-wife.

"Why, yes. Didn't you know? He's giving up his ranch."

Robb looked round the table in surprise. There was a pause. Then Mrs. Malling broke it—

"He has spoken of it—hinted. But we wasn't expectin' it so soon. He's made his pile."

"Yes, he must have done so," said Robb readily. "The price he parted with his cattle to me for was ridiculous. I shall make a large profit out of my client. It'll all help towards furnishing, Al," he went on, turning to his fiancée.

"I'm so glad you are doing well now, Robb," the girl replied, with a happy smile.

"Yes." Then the man turned to Mrs. Malling. "We're going to get married this fall. I hope Alice has been learning something of housekeeping"—with a laugh.

"Why, yes. Alice knows a great deal more than she reckons to let on, I guess," said the farm-wife, with a fat chuckle.

Prudence now spoke for the first time since Robb's arrival. She looked up suddenly, and, though she tried hard to speak conversationally, there was a slightly eager ring in her voice.

"When is George Iredale going to leave the ranch?"

Robb turned to her at once.

"Can't say. Not yet, I should think. He seems to have made no preparations. Besides, I've got to see him again in a day or two."

"Then you will stay out here?" asked Alice eagerly.

"Well, no." Robb shook his head with a comical expression of chagrin. "Can't be done, I'm afraid. But I'll come over here when I'm in the neighbourhood, if possible." Then to Mrs. Malling, "May I?"

"Why, certainly," said the farm-wife, with characteristic heartiness. "If you come to this district without so much as a look in here, well, you can just pass right along for the future."

When the meal was over the old lady rose from the table.

"Alice," said she, "you stay right here. Sarah and I'll clear away. Prudence, my girl, just lie down and get your rest. Maybe you'll feel better later on. Come along, Sarah; the young folks can get on comfortably without us for once."

Prudence made no attempt to do as her mother suggested. She moved about the room, helping with the work. Then the two old ladies adjourned to the kitchen. Robb and Alice had moved over to the well-worn sofa at the far end of the room, and Prudence took up her position at the open window. She seemed to have no thought of leaving the lovers together; in fact, it seemed as though she had forgotten their existence altogether. She stood staring out over the little front garden with hard, unmeaning eyes. From her expression it is doubtful if she saw what her eyes looked upon. Her thoughts were of other matters that concerned only herself and another.

The low tones of the lovers sounded monotonously through the room. They, too, were now wrapt in their own concerns, and had forgotten the presence of the girl at the window. They had so much to say and so little time in which to say it; for Robb had to make Ainsley that night.

The cool August evening was drawing on. The threshing gang was returning from the fields, and the purple haze of sundown was rising above the eastern horizon; Prudence did not move. Her hands were clasped before her; her pale face might have been of carved stone. There was only the faintest sign of life about her, and that was the steady rise and fall of her bosom.

A cool breeze rustled in through the open window and set the curtains moving. Then all became still again. Two birds squabbled viciously amongst the branches of a blue-gum in the little patch of a garden, but Prudence's gaze was still directed towards the horizon. She saw nothing; she felt nothing but the pain which her own thoughts brought her.

Suddenly the sound of something moving outside became audible. There was the noisy yawn of some large animal rising from its rest. Then came the slow, heavy patter of the creature's feet. Neche approached the window. His fierce-looking head stood well above the sill. His greenish eyes looked up solemnly at the still figure framed in the opening. His ears twitched attentively. There was no friendly motion of his straight, lank tail; but his appearance was undoubtedly expressive of some sort of well-meaning, canine regard. Whether the dog understood and sympathized with the girl at the window it would have taken something more than a keen observer to have said. But in his strangely unyielding fashion he was certainly struggling to convey something to this girl from whom he was accustomed to receive nothing but kindness.

For some moments he stood thus, quite still. His unkempt body rose and fell under his wiry coat. He was a vast beast, and the wolf-grey and black of his colouring was horribly suggestive of his ancestry. Presently he lifted one great paw to the window. Balancing his weight upon his only serviceable hind-leg, he lifted himself and stood with both front feet upon the sill, and pushed his nose against the girl's dress. She awoke from her reverie at the touch, and her hands unclasped, and she slowly caressed the bristly head. The animal seemed to appreciate the attention, for, with his powerful paws, he drew himself further into the room.

The girl offered no objection. She paid no heed to what he was doing. Her hand merely rested on his head, and she thought no more about him. Finding himself unrebuffed Neche made further efforts; then, suddenly, he became aware of the other occupants of the room. Quick as a flash his nose was directed towards the old sofa on which they were seated, and his eyes, like two balls of phosphorescent light, gleamed in their direction. He

became motionless at once. It seemed as though he were uncertain of something.

He was inclined to resent the presence of these two, but the caress of the soft, warm hand checked any hostile demonstration beyond a whine, half plaintive, half of anger.

The disturbing sound drew Alice's attention, and she looked over to where Prudence was standing; it was then she encountered the unblinking stare of the hound's wicked eyes. The sight thrilled her for a moment, nor could she repress a slight shudder. She nudged her companion and drew his attention without speaking. Robb followed the direction of her gaze, and a silence followed whilst he surveyed the strange apparition.

He could only see the dog's head—the rest of the creature was hidden behind the window curtain—and its enormous size suggested the great body and powerful limbs which remained concealed. To Robb there was a suggestion of hell about the cruel lustre of the relentless eyes.

At last he broke into a little nervous laugh.

"By Jove!" he said. "I thought for the moment I'd got 'em. Gee-whizz! The brute looks like the devil himself. What is it? Whose?"

Without replying, Alice called to her friend.

"Let Neche come in, Prue," she said. "That is"—dubiously—"if you think it's safe." Then she turned to Robb. "He's so savage that I'm afraid of him. Still, with Prue here, I think he'll be all right; he's devoted to her."

At the sound of the girl's voice Prudence turned back from the window like one awakening from a dream. Her eyes still had a far-away look in them, and though she had heard the voice it seemed doubtful as to whether she had taken the meaning of the words. For a moment her eyes rested on Alice's face, then they drooped to the dog at her side, but Alice was forced to repeat her question before the other moved. Then, in silence, she stepped back and summoned the dog to her with an encouraging chirrup. Neche needed no second bidding. There was a scramble and a scraping of sharp claws upon the woodwork, then the animal stood in the room. And his attitude as he eyed the two seated upon the sofa said as plainly as possible, "Well, which one is it to be first?"

Robb felt uneasy. Alice was decidedly alarmed at the dog's truculent appearance.

But the tension was relieved a moment later by the brute's own strange behaviour. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, Neche plumped down upon his hind quarters. His pricked ears drooped, and his two fore paws began to beat a sort of tattoo upon the floor. Then followed a broken whine, tremulous and blandishing, and the great head moved from side to side with that curious movement which only dogs use to express their gladness. Then the strange, three-legged beast went further. Down he threw himself full length upon the floor and grovelled effusively, whining and scraping the boards in a perfect fervour of abject delight.

Robb looked hard at the dog. Then he laughed and turned to Alice.

"What is the creature's name? I didn't catch it."

"Neche," she replied.

Robb held out his hand encouragingly and called the dog by name. The animal continued to squirm but did not offer to come nearer. Every now and then its head was turned back, and the green eyes looked up into Prudence's face. At last Robb ceased his efforts. His blandishments were ineffectual beyond increasing the dog's effusive display.

"A husky," he said, looking across at Prudence. "A bad dog to have about the house. He reminds me of the animals we had up north in our dog-train. They're devils to handle and as fierce as wild cats. We had one just like him. Unusually big brute. He was our 'wheeler.' The most vicious dog of the lot. The resemblance is striking. By Jove!" he went on reminiscently, "he was a sulky, cantankerous cuss. His name was 'Sitting Bull,' after the renowned Sioux Indian chief. We had to be very careful of the other dogs on account of his 'scrapping' propensities. He killed one poor beast. I think we nicknamed him rather appropriately. He was affectionately dubbed 'Bully.'"

As Robb pronounced the name he held out his hand again and flicked his fingers. The dog rose from his grovelling posture and came eagerly forward, wagging his lank tail. He rubbed his nose against the man's hand and slowly licked the sun-tanned skin.

Robb's brows drew together in a pucker of deep perplexity. He looked the animal over long and earnestly,

and slowly there crept into his eyes an expression of wondering astonishment. He was interrupted in his inspection by the girl at his side.

"Why, he is treating you like an old friend, Robb."

The man sat gazing down upon the wiry coat of the beast.

"Yes," he said shortly. Then he looked over at Prudence. "Yours?" he went on.

The girl shook her head.

"No, he belongs to Hervey."

"Um! I wonder where he got him from," in a meditative tone.

"Somewhere out in the wilds of the Yukon," put in Alice.

"Ah! The Yukon." And Robb's face was serious as he turned towards the window and looked out at the creeping shadows of evening.

There was a pause. Prudence was thinking of anything but the subject of Robb's inquiries. Alice was curious, but she forbore to question. She had heard her lover's account of his misadventure in the Alaskan hills, but she saw no connection between the hound and that disastrous affair. But the man's thoughts were hard at work. Presently he rose to depart.

He bade Prudence good-bye and moved towards the door. The dog remained where he had been standing and looked after him. At the door Robb hesitated, then he turned and looked back.

"Poor old Bully," he said.

With a bound the dog was at his side. Then the man turned away, and, accompanied by Alice, left the room. In the passage he paused, and Alice saw an expression on his face she had never seen before. He was nervous and excited, and his eyes shone in the half-light.

"Al," he said slowly, "I know that dog. *And his name is Bully.* Don't say anything to anybody. Hervey may be able to tell me something of those who robbed us up in the hills. But on no account must you say anything to him; leave it to me. I shall come here again—soon. Good-bye, little woman."

That evening as Robb Chillingwood rode back to Ainsley, he thought of many things, but chiefly he reviewed the details of that last disastrous journey when he and Grey had traversed the snow-fields of Alaska together.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LAST OF LONELY RANCH

THERE are moments which come in all lives when calm reflection is powerless to influence the individual acts; when calmness, even in the most phlegmatic natures, is impossible; when a tide of impulse sweeps us on, giving us not even so much as a breathless, momentary pause in which to consider the result of our headlong career. We blunder on against every jagged obstacle, lacerated and bleeding, jolting cruelly from point to point, whither our passions irresistibly drive us. It is a blind, reckless journey, from which there is no escape when the tide sets in. We see our goal ahead, and we fondly believe that because it is ahead we must come to it. We do not consider the awful road we travel, nor the gradual exhaustion which is overtaking us. We do not realize that we must fall by the wayside for lack of strength, nor even, if our strength be sufficient to carry us on to the end, do we ask ourselves, shall we be able to draw aside out of the raging torrent when our goal is reached? or shall we be swept on to the yawning Beyond where, for evermore, we must continue to struggle hopelessly to return? Once give passion unchecked sway, and who can say what the end will be?

It was at such a moment in her life at which Prudence had arrived. Her mind was set upon an object which absorbed all her faculties, all her brain, all her feelings. Had she been able to pause, even for one moment, reason must have asserted itself and she would have understood the folly of what she was doing. But that moment was denied her. All the latent passions of a strong nature had been let loose and she was swept on by their irresistible tide. She believed that she was the appointed

avenger of the man she had once loved, and that this duty unfulfilled would be a crime, the stain of which nothing could wipe out. Iredale must be confronted, challenged, and——

And so she came to Lonely Ranch on her self-imposed errand of justice.

The man she sought was not in the house when she came. The valley seemed to be devoid of life as she rode up. But the solitude was almost instantly broken by the appearance of Chintz from the region of the barn. She dispatched him in search of his master and passed into the bachelor sitting-room to await his coming.

She was restless and her nerves were strung to a great tension. Her eyes still shone with that peculiar light which ever seemed to look out of her brother's. There was no yielding in the set of her mouth. Her resolve disfigured the sweetness which usually characterized her beautiful features.

She stood before the window, looking out upon the shadow-bathed valley. She saw before her the dark wall of foliage which rose to the heights of the Front Hill. Not a living soul was about, only was there a rising wind which disturbed the unbroken forest of pines. She turned abruptly from the view as though she could not bear the solitude which was thus made so apparent. She crossed over to where the bookcase stood against the wall, and glanced in through the glazed doors. But she comprehended nothing of what she saw. She was thinking, thinking, and her mind was in a tumult of hysterical fancies. And she was listening too; listening for a sound —any sound other than that which the wind made. Mechanically she came over to the table and leant against it in an attitude of abstraction. She shivered; she stood up to steady herself and she shivered again. And all the time the frenzied eyes gleamed in their beautiful oval setting, the lips were drawn inwards, and there remained only a sharply-defined line to mark the sweet mouth. Presently her lips parted and she moistened them with her tongue. A fever seemed to be upon her, and mouth and throat were parched.

Suddenly the sound for which she waited came. She darted eagerly to the window and saw Chintz pass round

in the direction of the barn. Then she saw the burly figure of the man she was awaiting appear in the clearing fronting the house.

George Iredale came along at a robust gait. He was clad in moleskin riding-breeches, much stained with clay, as though he had been digging; a soft shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled up above the elbow; his Stetson hat was adjusted at the correct angle upon his head; and he wore a pair of tan-coloured field boots, much smeared with the signs of toil. He came rapidly towards the house. There was nothing furtive, nothing guilty about this man's bearing; he came readily to meet his visitor, and his appearance was the confident bearing of a man who has little to fear.

She saw him look towards the window where she stood, and his smile of welcome set her nerves tingling with a sensation she failed to understand. Her hand went round to the pocket of her linen riding-skirt and remained there. She heard his step in the hall; she heard him approach and turn the door-handle. As he came into the room she faced him.

"Why, Prudence, this is a delightful——" he began. But she interrupted him coldly.

"One moment," she said, and her voice was hoarse with the dryness of her throat. "I have not come over for any visit of pleasure, but strictly upon a matter of—of—business. There are some explanations which we both need to make, but more especially you."

"Yes."

Iredale was gazing earnestly into the face before him. He was trying to fathom the meaning of her coldness. For the moment he wondered; then, slowly, he began to understand that Hervey had been at work.

"You got my note," he said, choosing to ignore the result of his observations. "My delay in calling at the farm was unavoidable. I am in the midst of disposing of my ranch. I had not expected that I should have been called upon to do so so soon. I beg that you will forgive me what must seem an unwarrantable delay."

Prudence's nerves were so strung that she felt as though she could strike him for his calm words. Her condition demanded the opposition of passion equal to her own.

His coolness maddened her. So long had she dwelt upon the accusation Hervey had brought against him that she believed in this man's guilt. The evidence of her own senses had militated against him, and now she steeled herself in an armour of unbelief. But, in spite of herself, the dictates of her heart were struggling hard to find the joints of her armour. Nor were the struggles lessened now that she stood confronting him. His coolness, though maddening to her, was not without effect. The moral influence he wielded was great.

She backed to the table; then she plunged into the subject of her mission without further preamble. Her eyes stared straight into his, and her tones sounded incisively in the stillness of the room.

"I little knew the man whom I was listening to when he offered me his life, nor had I an idea of how near I was to the man who inspired the words which have appeared in the paper—the words which were the last Leslie Grey ever uttered. What must have been your feelings when I told you that I knew their author to be a murderer?" Then, with scathing bitterness: "But your feelings must have long since been dead—dead as the poor creature you so wantonly sent to his reckoning. The time has come for you to defend yourself; that is, if defence you can offer. No flimsy excuse or extenuation will cover you. Even the Scriptures teach us that the penalty is 'a life for a life.' Yours is the hand that struck Leslie down, and now you must face the consequences of your wanton act."

Iredale's quiet eyes never attempted to avoid the girl's direct gaze, nor did he flinch as the accusation fell from her lips. Never was he more alert, never more gently disposed towards this half-demented creature than at that moment. He recognized the hand that had been at work, and he laid no blame upon her. His feelings were of sorrow—sorrow for the woman he loved, and sorrow for himself. But his thoughts were chiefly for her. He knew, as she had said, that his time had come.

"So Hervey has been to you to sell the discovery which I rejected at the price he asked. He told you that I was a smuggler; that the announcement in the paper was mine. And did he tell you that I was the murderer of

Leslie Grey? Or did your heart prompt you to that conclusion?"

The girl supported herself against the table with one hand, and the other was still in the pocket behind her. Iredale noted these things without moving his eyes from her face.

"Hervey told me the facts and the inevitable proof they bore. Nor was his statement exaggerated. My own reason told me that."

The man sighed. He had hoped that the work had been only of the brother's doing. He had hoped that she had come bearing Hervey's accusation and not her own.

"Go on," he said.

"I know you for what you really are, George Iredale. And now I have come to you to give you the chance of defending yourself. No man must be condemned without a hearing. Neither shall you. The evidence against you is overwhelming; I can see no escape for you. But speak, if you have anything to say in your defence, and I will listen. I charge you with the murder of Leslie Grey."

Just for one brief moment Iredale felt a shiver pass through his body. The icy tones of the girl's voice, the seemingly dispassionate words filled him with a horror unspeakable. Then he pulled himself together. He was on his defence before the one person in the world from whose condemnation he shrank. He did not answer at once. He wished to make no mistake. When at last he spoke his words came slowly as though he weighed well each syllable before he gave it utterance.

"With one exception all that Hervey has doubtless said of me is true. I am a smuggler; I inspired that line in the paper; but I am no—murderer. Leslie Grey's life was sacred to me at the time if only for the reason that he was your affianced husband. I loved you at that time as I have loved you for years, and all my thoughts and wishes were for your happiness. It would have made you happy to have married Grey, therefore I wished that you should marry him. I am quite unchanged. I will tell you now what neither you nor Hervey knows, even though it makes my case look blacker. I knew that Grey was on my track. I knew that he had discovered my secret. How he had done so I cannot say. He quarrelled

with me, and, in the heat of his anger, told me of his intentions. It was late one night at a card-party at your house, and just before he was so foully murdered. No doubt you, or any right-minded person for that matter, will say that this evidence only clinches the case against me. But, in spite of it, I assert my innocence. Amongst my many sins the crime Hervey charges me with"—he purposely avoided associating the charge with her—"is not numbered. Can I hope that you will believe me?"

The gentle tones in which the burly man spoke, the earnest fearlessness which looked out from his quiet eyes, gave infinite weight to all he said. Prudence shook her head slowly, but the fire in her eyes was less bright, and the voice of her own heart crying out began to make itself heard in the midst of her chaotic thought.

She tried to stiffen herself for the task she had undertaken, but the result was not all she sought. Still, she replied coldly—

"How can I believe with all the black evidence against you? You, in all this region, were the one man interested in Leslie's death. His life meant penitentiary to you; his death meant liberty. Your own words tell me that. How can I believe such a denial as you now make? Tell me, have you no proof to offer? Account for the day on which Leslie met his death; prove your movements upon that day."

The girl's denial of belief was belied by the eagerness in her voice. For one brief instant a flash of hope rose in her. She saw a loophole for her lover. She longed to believe him: But the hope died down, leaving her worse distracted for its coming.

For Iredale did not speak, and his face assumed a look of gloom.

"Ah, you cannot—you cannot," she went on hysterically. "I might have known, I did know." A world of passion again leapt into her eyes. Then something of the woman broke through her anger, and a heart-breaking piteousness sounded in her voice. "Oh, why, why did you do this thing? Why did you stain your hands with such a crime as murder? What would his living have meant to you? At worst the penitentiary. Was it worth it to destroy thus the last chance of your immortal

soul? Oh, God! And to think of it! A murderer!" Then the fierce anger became dominant once more. "But you shall not escape. Your crime shall be expiated as far as human crimes can be expiated. The gallows awaits you, George Iredale, and your story shall be told to the world. You shall hang unless you can give to judge and jury a better denial than you have given to me." She suddenly broke off. A whistling indrawn breath startled the man before her. She gazed round her wildly; she had remembered what she had come for. She had forgotten when she had talked of "judge and jury." Her face assumed a ghastly hue at the recollection. Her eyes alone still told of the madness that possessed her.

Nor was Iredale without an uneasy feeling at what he saw—that catch of breath; that hunted look as she gazed about the room. Intuition served him in the moment of crisis. What was the meaning? Why was that hand concealed in her dress? There was only one possible answer to such questions, and he read the answer aright.

"Prudence," he said, in his deep musical voice, whilst his keen eyes riveted her attention, "I can prove my innocence of the crime you charge me with. Listen to me patiently, and I will tell you how. Do not let your anger drive you to any rash act, which might bring you—life-long regret."

The girl made a sharp ejaculation. But she did not attempt to interrupt him.

"I can prove that I was not within three hundred miles of this place on the day of Leslie's death," the man went on. "That I was in a city to the west of here distributing"—bitterly—"my wares. I can prove all this—to you. And I intend that before you leave me to-day you shall be a witness to my innocence, even against all prejudice. But before judge and jury it will be different—very different." He sighed. "There I cannot prove my innocence, for to do so would be to betray my comrades—those who have traded with me and trusted me—and send them to the penal servitude which also awaits me." His eyes had become reflective. He seemed to be talking to himself now rather than to the woman before him. "No, I cannot save myself at such a cost. Even to escape the gallows I will not play the part of Judas."

The woman made no reply. She stood staring at him with all that was best in her shining in her eyes. She was trying to follow his every word and to take his meaning, and the one thought which dominated her whole mind was his expressed ability to prove his innocence to her.

He seemed to awake from some melancholy reverie, and again his eyes sought hers.

"Do you wish me to prove my innocence?"

"Yes; you must—you shall!"

The girl moved from the table; and, for the first time during the interview, her hand was removed from the pocket in her skirt. Hope filled the heart in which but now the fires of hell had seemed to burn. She drank in his words with a soul-consuming thirst. The proof! That was what she required.

Iredale went on with grave gentleness.

"The proof is in here." He moved to the book-case and opened a secret recess in the back of it. "In this cupboard."

He produced a pile of books and brought them to the table. Picking out one he opened it at the date of Grey's death. It was a diary. He read out the entries for the entire week, all of which bore out his testimony. Every one was dated at a different town or village, and related to his sales of opium. He then opened another book and showed the entries of his sales and the figures. He went through the whole pile, book after book, and all of them bore out his statement as to his whereabouts. Then he produced several contracts; these were deeds between himself and various traders, and were dated at the towns at which they were signed. Each book and paper he passed on to Prudence for her scrutiny, drawing her attention to the corroboration in the evidence. There could be no doubt as to the genuineness of these facts, and the girl's last shadowy doubts of his innocence evaporated before the overwhelming detail. The hope which had filled her heart was now replaced by a triumphant joy. This man had shown her, had convinced her, and she wanted nothing more at that moment.

She looked up into his face, hoping to see a reflection of her own happiness in it. But there was no happiness there. His face was calm, but the melancholy had deepened in his eyes. What she saw came like an icy

douche to her, and the happy expression died upon her lips. She suddenly remembered that he had said he could not use this evidence to publicly declare his innocence.

"But——" she began.

He shook his head. He knew that she wished to protest. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes. Then the woman, the weaker, broke down under the strain. Tears came to her eyes, and she poured out all the pent-up grief of her hours of misery.

"Oh, George," she cried, "can you ever forgive my wickedness? I ought never to have believed. My heart told me that you were innocent; but the evidence—oh, the evidence. I could see no loophole. Everything pointed to you—you. And I, wretch that I am, I believed." And the girl sobbed as though her heart would break. Iredale made no attempt to soothe her; he felt that it would be good for her to weep. She leant against the table, and after a while her sobs quietened. Then the man touched her upon the shoulder.

"Don't cry, Prue; my heart bleeds for you when I listen to your sobs. You're not to blame for believing me guilty. Twelve jurymen will shortly do the same, and who can blame them?" He shrugged. "I must face the 'music' and take my chance. And now, child," he added, his hand still resting upon her shoulder, and smiling down upon her from his superior height, "give me that which you have concealed in your pocket. We will throw it away."

Prudence sprang up and moved beyond his reach.

"No, no! I can't! Don't ask me. Spare me the shame of it. As you love me, George, don't ask me for it."

"As you will, dear; I merely wished to rid ourselves of an ugly presence. While we are together—and it may not be for long now—nothing should come between us, least of all that."

The girl's tears had dried. She looked over at her lover. His compelling influence was upon her. She paused irresolute; then she plunged her hand into her pocket and drew forth a large revolver.

"Here, take it. Take it, and do what you like with it." Then she laughed bitterly. "You know me as I am now. I brought that to shoot you with, and afterwards to shoot myself. You see, I am a murderess at heart." And she smiled bitterly.

Iredale took the weapon and placed it in his book-case. Then he came to the girl's side and put his arm tenderly about her shoulders.

"Forget it, child; forget it as you would a hideous dream. Your feelings were forced upon you by—well, through my wretched doings. That which I have done to gain wealth has brought only what might have been expected in its train. No work of evil is without its sting, and, as is always the case, that sting seeks out the most sensitive part of its victim. The chastisement for my wrongdoing has been inflicted with cruel cunning, for you, Prue, have been made to suffer; thus is my punishment a hundredfold greater."

He drew her to him as he spoke, and gently smoothed her dark hair. Under the influence of his touch and the sound of his voice, the girl calmed. She nestled close to his side, and for a moment abandoned herself to the delight of being with him. But her thoughts would not remain idle for long. Suddenly she released herself and moved to arm's length from him.

"George," she said, in a tone of suppressed eagerness, "they cannot try you for—for murder. You will tell them. You will show them all—these. For my sake, for the sake of all your friends, you will not let them—condemn you. Oh, you can't allow it. Think," she went on, more passionately; "no men would willingly let you be declared guilty when they know you to be innocent. It must not be."

Iredale gave no outward sign. He had turned his face away and was gazing in the direction of the window. His reflective eyes looked out upon the valley, but his resolve was written plainly in them.

"Do not tempt me, Prue," he said quietly. "Were I to do otherwise than I have resolved, and obtained an acquittal thereby, I should live a life of utter regret. I should despise myself; I should loathe my own shadow. Nothing could be more revolting to me than the man who plays the part of a traitor, and were I that man life would be impossible to me. Think of it only for one moment, sweetheart, and your own good heart will tell you how impossible is that which you ask me to do. It cannot be. All the world would despise me. But even so, its utmost execration would be nothing compared with my own

feelings at the thought that I had saved myself by such methods." He withdrew his hand from her embrace. "No, when the time comes and I am forced to stand my trial for Grey's murder, I shall face it. Nor shall I betray my friends by one single word. And, too, when that time comes there will not remain one single trace of the traffic which has hitherto been part of my very existence. There shall be no possible chance of discovery for those who have trusted me. Your brother Hervey will never hold his hand. I know that. I realized that when he left me after seeking 'blackmail.' His vindictive nature will see this through. And perhaps I would rather have it so. It will then be settled once and for all. I may get off, but I fear that it will be otherwise."

At the mention of her brother's name Prudence started, and the blood receded from her anxious face, leaving it ghastly in its pallor. She had forgotten that he was even now on his way to Winnipeg for the express purpose of denouncing Iredale. For one instant she shook like an aspen. Then she recovered herself. What was to be done? She tried to think. This matter of Hervey was of her doing. She had driven him to it; urged him to it. Now she realized the full horror of what her foolish credulity had led her into. It had been in her power to stay his hand, at least to draw his fangs. Now it was too late. Suddenly she turned upon her lover in one final appeal. At that moment it seemed the only chance of saving him.

"George, there is a way out of it all; one last resource if you will only listen to me. You love me even in spite of the way I have wronged you. You belong to me if only by reason of our love. You have no right to throw your life away when you are innocent. God knows I honour you for your decision not to betray your companions. If it were possible, I love you more than ever. But the sin would be as great to throw your life away for such a shadow as it would be to deliver your friends up to justice. You can save yourself; you must. The border is near. We are right on it. Surely the way you have brought the Chinese into the country should provide an exit for us. Oh, my poor love, will you not listen to me? Will you not give me the life I crave? George, let us go—together."

Her words came passionately. She had stepped forward and placed her two brown hands upon his great shoulders, and her dark, earnest eyes gazed lovingly up into his.

The temptation was a sore one, and the man found it hard to resist. He experienced a sudden rush of blood to the brain. His body seemed to be on fire. He was pulsating with a mad passion. The thought of what she suggested came near to overthrowing his sternest resolve. To go with her. To have her evermore by his side. The thought was maddening. Surely he had never realized until that moment how dearly he loved this woman. But his strong nature came to his rescue in time. The passion had died down as swiftly as it had risen and left him cold and collected.

He gazed down into the brown eyes ever so kindly, ever so lovingly; and his answer came in a tone so gentle that the girl felt that whatever the future might hold for them, this moment had been worth living for.

"No, no, sweetheart. Not flight, even though you would be my companion. We love one another dearly, and for that very fact I could never allow myself to remain under this cloud. At all costs we will have the matter cleared. I owe it to you, to those at the farm, and to myself."

The girl's hands dropped to her sides and she turned away. Then all the agony of her soul found vent in one exclamation.

"Oh, God!" she cried. And with that last cry came the revealing flash which answered the question she had so repeatedly asked herself. She turned back to her lover, and the agonized expression of her face had changed, and in her eyes was the eager light of excitement. Iredale saw the change, but did not recognize its meaning. He felt that she must no longer remain there.

"Child, I want you to go back to the farm and tell them of the accusation that has been brought against me. Tell them all the circumstances of it. Tell them that I have clearly convinced you of my innocence; but, as you love me, I charge you not to reveal the manner in which it was done. Tell your mother that I shall come over to-morrow, and she shall hear the whole story from my own lips. I wish to do this that she may hear my version before she reads of what must happen in the papers. After that I shall go into Winnipeg and set the law in motion. I will clear myself or—otherwise. But on

your honour you must promise that all I have shown you to-day remains a secret between us."

Prudence listened intently to all he said, but a quiet look of resolve slowly crept into her eyes.

"I promise," she said, and Iredale thanked her with a look.

There was the briefest of pauses; then she went on—

"On one condition."

"What do you mean?"

Iredale looked his surprise.

"Now you must hear me, George," she went on eagerly. "You have charged me with this thing. You must abide by my time. A day more or less can make little difference to you."

"But I wish to give myself up before others can make the charge."

"Just so. And in the meantime I want your promise not to come to the farm until the "—she paused to make a swift mental calculation—"day after to-morrow at four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Tell me your reason."

"That is my own." The girl was smiling now. Then she again became excited. "Promise, promise, promise! There is no time to lose. Even now I fear we are too late."

Iredale looked dubiously at her. Suddenly he saw her face darken.

"Promise!" she demanded almost fiercely, "or I will not abide by my promise to you."

"I promise."

An expression of relief came into Prudence's eyes, and she stepped towards him and looked up into his face.

"Good-bye, George, dearest."

The man suddenly clasped her in a bear-like embrace and rained passionate, burning kisses on her upturned lips. Then quietly she released herself. She stood away from him holding one of his great hands in both of hers.

"Quick! Now my horse."

Iredale departed, and Prudence was left alone. She stood looking after him thinking, thinking.

"Can I do it?" she asked herself.

Damside City was the nearest telegraph station. It lay nearly thirty-five miles due west of Owl Hoot. It was merely a grain station for the district and in no sense

a village. She must make that point and so intercept Hervey with a telegraphic message. It was her one chance. In spite of her lover she would buy Hervey's silence, and trust to the future to set the rest straight. She was strong and her horse was good. She must reach the office before it was closed at six o'clock that evening. She calculated it up; she had just three hours in which to cover the distance. She looked out of the window. The wind was blowing from the east; that was good, it would ease the horse. She looked up at the sky, there were a few clouds scudding westwards.

"Yes, I'll do it," she said at last, "if it kills poor Kitty."

A moment later Iredale returned with the mare. The girl waited not a second. Her lover assisted her into the saddle reluctantly. He did not approve this sudden activity on the part of the girl. When she had settled herself she bent down, and their lips met in one long, passionate kiss.

"Good-bye George."

The man waved his adieu. His heart was too full to speak. She swung her mare round and galloped down the valley to the north. Her object was to clear the valley and then turn off to the west on the almost disused trail to Damside.

Iredale looked after her until the sound of the mare's hoofs died away in the distance. He was filled with wonder at her strange request and her hurried departure. But his speculations brought him to no definite conclusions, and he turned abruptly and called to his man, Chintz.

The man hurried from the stable.

"We have been a little delayed. Is everything ready?" Iredale looked up at the sky, then down at the grizzled face before him.

Chintz nodded.

"Good. Then get to work. Start the first fire directly beyond the graveyard to the east. The wind is getting up steadily. You are sure there are no farms to the west of us, between here and Rosy River?"

The man gave a negative shake of the head.

"That's all right then. There will be no damage done. And the river will cut the fire off. This time to-morrow we shall be homeless wanderers, Chintz—you and I." And the smuggler laughed bitterly.

Then his laugh died out.

"Well, to work. Set the fires going."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FOREST DEMON PURSUES

PRUDENCE swung her mare out on to the overgrown trail to Damside City. Kitty was a trim-built little "broncho," compact, well-ribbed, and with powerful shoulders and chest. She was just the animal to "stay" and travel fast. The road cut through the heart of the Owl Hoot bush, and ran in a diagonal direction, south-west towards the border. Then it converged with the border trail which skirted the great southern muskeg, and, passing through a broken, stony country, went on to Damside.

The wind was rapidly freshening, and the scudding clouds were quickly changing from white to grey, which, to the girl's practised mind, indicated an immediate change of weather. But she thought little of the matter beyond being thankful that the wind was well behind her, she wished to travel fast, and a "fair" wind is as necessary to the horseman, under such circumstances, as it is to the mariner.

For a time the roughness of the road required her attention. Kitty was surefooted, but the outstanding roots with which her path was lined needed careful negotiation. Presently the trail became wider and its surface more even, and signs of recent usage became apparent. The roots were worn down and the projecting stones had been removed. Neither did it take the girl long to decide whose servants had done these things. On the obscure trail were to be seen many signs of the traffic upon which the owner of Lonely Ranch had been engaged. Now Prudence gave Kitty her head, and the mare travelled at a great pace.

The breeze had chastened the laden air of the pine world. The redolent woods no longer scented the air,

which had in consequence become fresh and bracing. For the moment the emergency of her journey had dulled the girl's sensibilities to her surroundings. She looked out upon the beautiful tinted world, but she heeded nothing of what her eyes beheld. Her mind was set upon the object of her journey, and her thoughts were centred round the players in the drama of her life.

How different her life seemed to have suddenly become from that which she had contemplated that morning. A great triumphant joy was with her since her lover had established his innocence to her. Her troubles and anxieties were still many, and the least thing might upset every hope she entertained, but there was always with her the remembrance that George Iredale was innocent, and in that thought she felt a wonderful security. That he was a smuggler was a matter of insignificance. She loved him too well to let such knowledge narrow her estimation of him. She was too essentially of the prairie to consider so trifling a matter. Half the farmers in the country were in the habit of breaking the Customs regulations by cutting wood and hay on Government lands without a permit, and even hauling these things from across the border when such a course suited them, and in every case it was "contraband"; but they were thought no less of by their friends. Iredale was no worse than they, in spite of the fact that his offence carried with it a vastly heavier sentence.

But for the dread that she might be too late to intercept her brother, Prudence would almost have been happy as she raced along that westward-bound trail. She knew her brother's nature well. She knew that he was vindictive, and no doubt her own treatment of him had roused his ire and all the lower instincts of his malignant nature; but she also knew that he loved money—needed money. His greed for gold was a gluttonous madness which he was incapable of resisting, and he would sacrifice any personal feeling provided the inducement was sufficiently large. She meant that the inducement should be as large as even he could wish, and she knew that in this direction his ideas were extensive. Her one trouble, the one thought which alarmed her, was the question of time. If the office were closed when she arrived, her journey would

have been in vain, for the operator lived in Ainsley and would have gone home; Hervey would have arrived in Winnipeg, and, by the time the office opened the following morning, the mischief would have been done.

She flicked her mare with the end of her reins and touched her flank with her heel. Kitty responded with a forward bound. The increased speed was all too slow for the rapid thought and deadly anxiety of the girl, but she was too good a horsewoman to press the willing beast beyond a rational gait.

The hardy mare " propped " jerkily as she passed down the sharp side of a dried-out slough. She plunged through a thicket of long grass, and a grey cloud of mosquitoes rose and enveloped horse and rider. The vicious insects settled like a grey cloth upon the heated mare, and Prudence's soft flesh was punctured by hundreds of venomous needles at once. The girl swept the insects from neck and face, heedless of the torturing stings. The mare fretted and raced up the opposite slope, while the girl leant forward in her saddle and sought to relieve the staunch little creature's agony by sweeping the poisonous insects from her steaming coat.

The mare pressed on. Suddenly she threw up her head and snorted violently. Prudence was startled. Something had distracted Kitty's attention, and her wide-set ears were cocked in alarm. Her nose was held high, and again and again she snorted. In consequence her pace was slackened and became awkward. She no longer kept a straight line along the trail, but moved from side to side in evident agitation. Prudence was puzzled and endeavoured to steady the creature. But Kitty was not to be easily appeased. She rattled her bit and mouthed it determinedly, grabbing at the side bar with an evident desire to secure it in her teeth. The girl kept a tight rein and attempted to soothe her with the tender caress of her hand; but her efforts were unavailing. The ears were now turned backwards, and had assumed that curiously vicious inclination which in a horse is indicative of bad temper or equine terror. Kitty had no vice in her, and Prudence quickly understood the nature of her mare's feelings.

The failure of her soothing efforts alarmed the girl.

She sat up and looked about her. In the dense forest there seemed to be no unusual appearance. The trees were waving and bending in the wind, and their groanings had a sadly mournful effect upon the scene, but otherwise there was nothing strange to be observed. The sky had assumed a leaden hue, and in this direction the prospect was not alluring, but the clouds were fairly high and there was no suggestion of immediate storm.

Suddenly a couple of jack-rabbits darted across the road. The mare "propped," reared, and swung round towards the trees. Prudence brought her up to her work sharply. Then she saw that the rabbits were racing on ahead, down the trail. For the moment her patience gave way, and she dug her heel hard against Kitty's side and the mare plunged forward. But her gait remained unsteady, and in her agitation she kept changing her stride, and once even tripped and nearly fell.

A coyote followed by his mate and two young ones ran out on to the trail and raced along ahead of her. They did not even turn their heads to look at her. Further on a great timber-wolf appeared and trotted along the edge of the woods, every now and then turning its head furtively to glance back.

Then quite suddenly Prudence became conscious of something unusual. She raised her face to the grey vault of the sky and sniffed at the air. A pungent scent was borne upon the wind. The odour of resinous wood, so strong as to be sickly, came to her, and its pungency was not the ordinary scent of the forest about her.

Half-a-dozen kit-foxes dashed out on to the trail and joined in the race, and the "yowl" of the prairie dog warned her that other animals were about. The resinous odour grew stronger every moment, and at last Prudence detected the smell of smoke. She turned her head and looked back; and behind her, directly in her wake, she saw a thin grey haze which the wind was sweeping along above the trees.

She drew her mare up to a stand, and as she sat looking back, a deadly fear crept into her eyes. Kitty resented the delay and reared and plunged in protest. The restraint maddened her. And all the time the girl saw that the smoke haze was thickening, and some strange

distant sounds like the discharge of heavy ordnance reached her.

The sweet oval face wore a strained expression; her eyes were wide open and staring, and the fear which looked out of them was fear of no ordinary danger. She watched the dull haze as it thickened and rolled on towards her. She saw it rise like great steam-jets and wreath itself upwards as fresh volumes displayed the lower strata. She saw the dull brown tint creep into it as it densified, and she knew that *it was smoke*. The rest needed no explanation beyond the evidence of her senses. The sickly resinous smell told her what had happened. The forest was on fire!

The thought found vent in a muttered exclamation. Then came an after-thought—

"And the wind is blowing it straight along behind me."

For a moment she gazed about her wildly. She looked to the right and left. The forest walls were impassable. She looked back along the trail. The narrow ribbon-like space was filled with a fog of smoke which was even now enveloping her. What should she do? There was nothing for it but to go on. But the fire must be travelling apace in the high wind. Still she stood. It seemed as though for the moment her faculties were paralyzed with the horror of her discovery.

But at last she was moved to action. The mare became troublesome. The girl could no longer keep her still. The distracted animal humped her back and began to show signs of "bucking." Then came a rush of animals along the trail; they came racing for dear life, and their numbers were augmented from the wooded depths which lined their route.

Antelope led the way; with heads thrown up and antlers pressed low down upon their backs they seemed to fly over the sandy soil. Then came the "loping" dogs, coyotes, prairie wolves. Birds of all sorts assembled in one long continuous flight. The animal kingdom of that region of forest seemed to have become united in their mutual terror—wolf and hare, coyote and jack-rabbit, hawk and blackbird, prairie chicken and grey-owl; all sworn enemies in time of calm prosperity, but now, in their terror, companions to the last. And all the

time, in the growing twilight of smoke, came the distant booming as of the discharge of great cannon.

The girl leaned forward. She clapped her heel hard against the mare's side, and with a silent prayer joined in the race for life.

She had no exact knowledge of how far these woods extended, or where the break would come which should cut off the fire. The wild beasts were speeding on down the trail, and, with the instinct of her prairie world, she reasoned that in this direction alone must lie safety.

The smoke grew denser and more choking. Her eyes became sore. Under her she felt the mare stretching herself to the utmost of her gait. She came up with many of the racing denizens of the forest, but they did not attempt to move off the trail at her approach. They were beyond the fear of human presence. A more terrible enemy was behind them, pursuing with gigantic strides which demolished space with incredible swiftness.

Every moment the air grew hotter in spite of the mare's best efforts, and Prudence knew that the fire was gaining. Hill or dale made no difference now. It must be on—on, or the devouring monster would be upon them. Kitty never flagged, and with increasing speed her footing became even more sure. A loose line, with body bent well forward to ease the animal, Prudence did all she knew to assist her willing companion; but for every stride the faithful mare took, she knew that the fire was gaining many yards.

The booming had increased to a steady roar, in the midst of which the deep, thunderous detonations came like the peals of a raging storm; the wind rushed headlong forward, the fire bringing with it an almost cyclonic sweep of heated air. The mighty forest giants about her bent like reeds under the terrible force, and shrieked aloud their fears at the coming of the devouring demon.

The mare rushed down into a wide hollow. A culvert bridged a reedy slough. The affrighted beast raced across it. The stream of the animal world swept on about her. She breasted the steep ascent opposite, and Prudence was forced to draw rein. She dared not allow the horse to race up such an incline, even though the fire were within a quarter of a mile of her; she would have been mad to exhaust the faithful creature, which was now her only

hope. Even the poor forest creatures, mad as they were with terror, slackened their gait.

At length the hilltop was gained, and a long descent confronted them. Kitty showed no signs of exhaustion yet, and faced her work amidst the rush of refugees with all her original zest. Down into the valley they tore, for the worst of all perils was in pursuit.

The valley stretched away far into the distance; ahead, here, in this hollow, the air was clearer. The hill had shut off the fog of smoke for the moment. The refugees now had a smooth run, and a faint glimmer of hope gladdened the heart of the girl.

Without slackening her speed, she looked back at the hill, fearing to see the ruthless flames dart up over the path which her mare's feet had so recently trodden. But the flames had not yet reached the brow, and she sighed her satisfaction. The smoke was pouring over the tree-tops, and, circling and rolling in a tangled mass, was creeping down in her wake, but as yet there were no flames. She looked this way and that at the dark green of the endless woods, the gracious fields of bending pines. She thought of the beauty which must so soon pass away, leaving behind it only the charred skeletons, the barren, leafless trunks, which for years would remain to mark the cruel path of flame.

Suddenly the roar, which had partly died away into a vague distant murmur beyond the hill, burst out again with redoubled fury. Again she looked round, and the meaning was made plain to her. She saw the yellow fringe of flame as it came dancing, chaotic, a tattered ribbon of light upon the brow of the hill; she saw the dense pall of smoke hovering high above it like the threat of some dreadful doom. The black of the forest upon the summit remained for a second, then over swept the red-gold fire, absorbing all, devouring all, in an almost torrential rush down to the woodlands below.

And now she beheld a sea of living fire as the hills blazed before her eyes. It was as though the whole place had been lit at one touch. The sea rolled on with incredible swiftness, as the tongues of flame licked up the inflammable objects they encountered. The efforts of her mare became puerile in comparison with the fearful

pace of the flames. How could she hope to outstrip such awful speed ?

On, on raced the mare, and on came the molten torrent. Now the heat was intolerable. The girl leant limply over her faithful horse's neck; she was dizzy and confused. Every blast of the wind burnt her more fiercely as the fire drew nearer. She felt how utterly hopeless were her horse's efforts.

The mare faltered in her stride; it was her first trip. The girl shrieked wildly. She screamed at the top of her voice like one demented. Her nerves were failing, and hysteria gripped her. Kitty redoubled her efforts. The fear of the fire was aggravated by the girl's wild cries, and she stretched herself as she had never done before.

Now it seemed as though they were racing in the heart of a furnace. The whole country was in flames, and the roar and crashing of falling timber was incessant, and the yellow glow was everywhere—even ahead.

Blinded, dazed, the girl was borne on by the faithful Kitty. She no longer thought of what was so near behind her. What little reason was left to her she centred upon keeping her seat in the saddle. An awful faintness was upon her, and everything about her seemed distant.

Kitty alone fought out the battle of that ride; her mistress was beyond all but keeping upon the faithful animal's back. Had she been less exhausted the girl would have seen what the mare saw. She would have seen the broad stream of the Rosy river ahead, and less than a quarter of a mile away. But she saw nothing; she felt nothing; she cared for nothing but her hold upon the saddle. Thus it was that when she came to the riverside, and the mare plunged from the steep bank into the deep, quick-flowing stream, she knew not what had happened, but, with a strange tenacity, she held to the pummels of her saddle, while her loyal friend breasted the waters.

How they got out of the river Prudence never knew, nor did she fully realize all that had happened when at last the horse and rider again stood on firm ground. And the tough little broncho had covered another mile or more before the girl awoke to the fact that they were now in an open prairie country, and skirting the brink

of the great southern muskeg. Then it all came back to her, and, as Kitty kept steadily on, she looked fearfully about her. She saw away in the distance the awful pall, the lurid gleam of the flames; and a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving went up from that lonely trail for the merciful escape which had been hers. The girl leant over her mare's shoulder and caressed the foaming neck.

"Good Kitty, faithful little mare," she exclaimed emotionally. Then she looked ahead, and she remembered all. "But on, girl, on. There is more to do yet."

* * * * * * *

The telegraph operator at Damside was closing up his little shack. He had just disconnected his instrument and was standing in his doorway gazing out across the prairie to the east, watching the vast clouds of smoke belching from the direction of the woods. All about him was a heavy haze, and a nasty taste of smoke was in his mouth. He looked across to the only other buildings which formed the city of Damside, the grain elevator and the railway siding buildings. His own hut was close beside the latter. The men were leaving their work. Then presently he looked back in the direction of the distant fire.

"'Tain't the prairie," he muttered. "Too thick. Guess the woods are blazin'. That's beyond the Rosy. Can't cross there, so I reckon there's no danger to us. The air do stink here; guess I'll go and git my hand-car and vamoose."

He turned back to the room and put on his hat. Just as he left his doorway to pass over to where his handcar was standing on the railway track, he brought up to a halt. A horse and rider were racing up the trail towards him.

"Hullo, what's this?" he exclaimed sharply. "Maybe it *is* the prairie."

Prudence drew rein beside him. She had seen her man, and she knew that she was in time. Her joy was written in her face.

"My, but I've had a time," she exclaimed, as she slid down from her saddle. "I thought that fire had got me. Call up Winnipeg, please, Mr. Frances."

"Why, Miss Malling, have you ridden through that?" asked the operator, pointing to the distant smoke.

"Not through it, but with it distinctly hot upon my heels—or rather my mare's," the girl laughed. "But I want you to send a message for me. It isn't too late for Winnipeg?"

"Late, bless you, no. But what is it? Prairie or forest?"

"Forest," replied the girl shortly. "Where's a form?"

They passed into the hut. Prudence proceeded to write out her message while the man connected up Winnipeg and carried on a short conversation.

"Bad fire," he said.

"Very."

Prudence began to write.

"Just where?"

"Owl Hoot."

"River'll stop it."

"Yes."

"Good."

Prudence went on writing.

"Iredale's ranch burnt out?"

The girl started.

"Don't know."

"Must be."

"Oh!" Then: "Here you are; and do you mind if I wait for an answer?"

"Pleasure." And the man read the message—

"To Hervey Malling, Northern Union Hotel, Winnipeg.

"Return at once. Money awaiting you. Willing to pay the price on your arrival. Do not fail to return at once. The other matter can rest.

"PRUDENCE."

The operator tapped away at the instrument.

* * * * * * *

Hervey was sitting in the Northern Union Hotel smoking-room. He was talking to a burly man, with a red face and a shock of ginger-grey hair. This was the proprietor of the hotel.

"How long can you give me? I can settle everything by this day month. The harvesting is just finished. I only need time to haul the grain to the elevator. Will that satisfy you?"

The big man shrugged.

"You've put me off so often, Mr. Malling. It's not business, and you know it," he replied gutturally. "Will you give me an order on—your crop?"

He looked squarely into the other's face. Hervey hesitated. He knew that he could not do this, and yet he was sorely pressed for money. However, he made up his mind to take the risk. He thought his mother would not go back on him.

"Very well."

He turned as the bell-boy approached.

"Telegram for you sir; 'expressed.'"

Hervey took the envelope and tore it open. He read his sister's message, and a world of relief and triumph lit up his face.

"Good," he muttered. Then he passed it to his companion. "Read that. Do you still need a mortgage? I shall set out to-night."

The hotel proprietor read the message, and a satisfied smile spread over his face. It did not do for him to press his customers too hard. But still he was a business man. He, too, felt relieved.

"This relates to——"

"An outlying farm of mine which I have now sold."

"Your promise will be sufficient, Mr. Malling. I thought we should find an amicable settlement for our difficulty. You start to-night?"

"Yes."

CHAPTER XIX

THE AVENGER

ALICE was standing at the gate of the little front garden. She was talking to her lover, who had just ridden up from the direction of Owl Hoot. Robb had not dismounted, and his face was very serious as he leant down towards her.

"And I never knew a word about it. It's a jolly good thing I obtained the delivery of his bunch of cattle when I did, or goodness knows what would have happened. Well, anyhow I've lost a nice lump. My client, when he heard about the place being for sale, wanted to buy it for a back country for his beeves to winter in. Just my confounded luck. I knew there was a big fire out this way, but I never thought that Iredale was the unfortunate victim. Now I've got to go over to Lakeville to see him —he's staying there, you know, since he was burnt out. I'll come back this way, and if Mrs. Malling can put me up for the night, I'll be grateful. My 'plug' won't stand the journey back home. You say Hervey will be along this evening?"

"Yes," replied the girl. Then seriously, "What are you going to do?"

"Interview him. There are things about that dog that want explaining. I take it he can explain 'em. I don't easily forget. And I owe some one a deal more than I've yet been able to pay. P'r'aps that dog 'll help me to discharge my debt. Good-bye, Al; I must be off or I shan't get back this afternoon."

Robb turned away in his cheerful, debonair manner and rode off. Troubles sat lightly on his stout heart. His effervescent nature never left him long depressed when Fortune played her freakish tricks upon him. He had lost his commission upon the sale of Iredale's land, but he had secured the better deal of the cattle. Therefore he was satisfied. But Robb was a very persistent

man in his seemingly haphazard fashion. He had promised himself an interview with Hervey about his dog. He had never forgotten or forgiven the disaster in the mountains, and he believed that Hervey would be able to set him on the track of Zachary Smith, whom he felt certain he had seen at the Winnipeg depôt. He hoped so; and, for this purpose, he intended to spend the night at Loon Dyke Farm.

As her lover rode away Alice turned back to the house. The anxious look was still upon her face. She knew that there was serious trouble in the family, and she could see no way of helping these people she loved. Prudence was in sad disgrace with her mother; she had been absent from the farm for two days and had only returned that morning. Mrs. Malling had been distracted with anxiety and grief until the reappearance of her daughter, and then, when she saw that she was well and that no accident had happened to her, she had flown into such a terrible passion that even Prudence had quailed before her. Never in her life had Alice seen the kindly old soul give way to such rage. No disparaging epithet had been too bad for her child, and she had literally chased the girl from the room in which they had met. Since then Prudence had retreated to her bedroom, and Hephzibah had poured out the vials of her wrath upon an empty kitchen, for even the long-suffering hired girl had feared to face her.

Now, as Alice approached the front door again, she heard the sound of high-pitched voices coming from the kitchen. Sarah Gurridge had come over while the farm-wife's rage was at its height; and, as Alice listened, she thought that these two old cronies were quarrelling. But her ears quickly told her that her surmise was wrong. She heard Prudence's voice raised in angry protest, and, instead of entering the house, she discreetly withdrew, passing round to the farmyard instead.

In the kitchen a stormy scene was being enacted.

Prudence was standing just inside the door. Her mother was beside a long table on which were laid out the necessaries for pastry-making. She had faced round upon the girl and stood brandishing a rolling-pin in one hand, and in the other she held a small basket of eggs. Sarah was seated in a high-backed Windsor chair. Her arms were folded across her waist, and her face expressed

perplexed alarm. Prudence's face was aflame; nor were her eyes one whit less angry than her mother's.

"But I say you shall hear me, mother, whether you like it or not. I'll not let you or any one else call me the filth which you did this morning for nothing."

The girl's voice was hoarse with nervous feeling. Mrs. Malling shook her rolling-pin in a perfect fury.

"Out of this kitchen, you baggage! Out of it, do you hear me? Go an' get your garments packed up, and out ye go into the street. Child o' my flesh, are ye? Out of my house, you drab, or maybe I'll be doing you a harm. I'll teach the like o' you to be stoppin' out o' nights an' then to come back wi'out a word of explainin'. I'll teach you."

"Give the child a hearing, Hephzibah," said Sarah, in her soft even tones, as there came a lull in the angry mother's tirade.

Prudence shot a grateful glance in her preceptor's direction.

Hephzibah turned swiftly on the peaceful Sarah. But the words of anger which hovered upon her lips remained unspoken. Sarah was an influence in the old lady's life, and long association was not without effect. She visibly calmed. Prudence saw the change and took advantage of it.

"How could I explain when you wouldn't listen to me?" she exclaimed resentfully. "Almost before I could say a word you called me all the shameful things you could think of. You drove me to silence when I was willing to tell you all—I was more than willing. You *must* know all, for the story I have to tell as nearly affects you as it does me. I stayed away from home to save an innocent man from the dreadful charge of murder, and your son from perpetrating the most wanton act of his worthless life."

A dead silence followed her words. Hephzibah stared at her with an expression of stupefied amazement, while Sarah turned in her chair with a movement which was almost a jolt. The silence was at last broken by the girl's mother.

"Murder? Hervey?"

And there was no understanding in her tone. Her mind seemed to be groping blindly, and she merely repeated the two words which struck her most forcibly.

"Yes, 'murder' and 'Hervey,'" Prudence retorted. "Hervey has accused George Iredale of the murder of Leslie Grey. Now will you listen to my explanation?"

Hephzibah precipitated herself into a chair. The rolling-pin was returned to its place upon the dough-board with a clatter, and the basket of eggs was set down with a force that sorely jeopardized its contents.

"Yes, girl. Tell me all. Let me hear what devil's work my Hervey's been up to. La sakes! an' George Iredale a murderer!"

And Prudence, her anger evaporated as swiftly as her mother's, told the two old ladies of her love for Iredale, and how he had asked her to be his wife. She told them how Hervey had come to her with the story of his discovery; how, after attempting to blackmail his victim, he had offered his information to her at a price. How she forced him to prove his case, and had sent him to Winnipeg with that object; how she had been nearly distracted, and eventually made up her mind to go and see Iredale himself; how the accused man had established to her his innocence beyond any doubt, and how he had shown her how impossible it would be for him to use the same means of clearing himself in a court of law. She dwelt upon each point, so that these two, who were so dear to her, should not fail to understand as she understood. Then she told them how, recognizing George's danger, she had resolved to intercept Hervey, and, with her mother's assistance, pay him off; and, finally, how she had been overtaken by the forest fire; and how, her mare exhausted, she had arrived at Damside in time to send her message to her brother; and how, failing any other means of returning home, she had taken shelter with the elevator clerk's wife until her mare had recovered and she was able to resume her journey to the farm.

It was a long story, and the many interruptions of her mother gave the girl much extra trouble in the telling; but with a wonderful patience, born of her anxiety for her lover, she dealt with every little point that puzzled her audience.

When the story was finished its effect was made curiously manifest. The one thing which seemed to have gripped her mother's intensest feeling was the part her boy had played. Her round eyes had grown stern, and her comely lips had parted as her breath came heavy and

fast. At last she burst out with a curious mixture of anger and sorrow in her words.

"Bone of my Silas; flesh of my flesh; an' to think o' the like. My Hervey a whelp of hell; a blood-sucker. Oh, that I should ha' lived to see such a day," and she rocked herself, with her hand supporting her head and her elbows planted upon her knees. "Oh, them travellin's in foreign parts. My poor, poor Silas; if he'd jest lived long 'nough to git around our boy with a horsewhip we might ha' been spared this disgrace. Prudence, girl, I'm that sorry for what I've said to you."

Tears welled in the old eyes, which had now become very wistful, and slowly rolled down the plump cheeks. Suddenly she gathered up her apron and flung it up over her head, and the rocking continued dismally. Prudence came over to her and knelt at her side, caressing her stout figure in sympathy. Sarah sat looking away towards the window with dreamy eyes. The old school-mistress made no comment; she was thinking deeply.

"Don't cry, mother," said Prudence, with an ominous catch in her voice. "Whatever Hervey's faults, he will reap his own punishment. I want you to help me now, dear. I want you to give me the benefit of your experience and your sound, practical sense. I must see this through. I have a wicked brother and an obstinate lover to deal with, and I want you to help me, and tell me what is best to do."

The apron was removed from Mrs. Malling's head, and her eyes, red and watery, looked at the girl at her side with a world of love in their depths.

"These two men will be here this afternoon," the girl went on. "George is coming to tell you his story himself, that you may judge him. He declares that, come what may, he will not rest with this shadow upon him. In justice to us, his friends, and to himself, he must face the consequences of his years of wrong-doing. Hervey will be here for his money. This is the position; and, according to my reckoning, they will arrive at about the same time. I don't quite know why, but I want to confront Hervey with the man he accuses. Now tell me what you think."

"I'm thinking you make the third of a pack of fool-heads," said the farm-wife gently. "George is no murderer, he's not the killin' sort. He's a man, he is. Then

why worrit? An' say, if that boy o' mine comes along he'll learn that them Ar'tic gold-fields is a cooler place for his likes than his mother's farm." The old woman's choler was rising again with tempestuous suddenness. "Say, he's worse'n a skunk, and a sight more dangerous than a Greaser. My, but he'll learn somethin' from them as can teach him!"

"Yes, mother," replied the girl, a little impatiently; "but you don't seem to see the seriousness of what he charges—"

"That I do, miss. Am I wantin' in understandin'? George is as innocent as an unborn babe, so what's the odds along o' Hervey's accusin'? It don't amount to a heap o' corn-shucks. That boy ain't responsible, I tell ye. He's like to get locked up himself in a luny 'sylum. I'll give him accusin'!"

"But, mother, that won't do any good. He must be paid off."

"An' so he shall—and so he shall, child. There's more dollars in this farm than he reckons on, and they're ready for usin' when I say the word. If it's pay that's needed, he shall be paid, though I ain't just understandin' the need."

Sarah's voice broke in at this point.

"The child's right, Hephzibah; there's money to be spent over this thing, or I'm no judge of human nature. Hervey's got a strong case, and, from what the story tells us, George is a doomed man if he goes before the court. Innocent he may be—innocent he is, I'll wager; but if he's obstinate he's done for."

The farm-wife made no reply, but sat gazing wistfully before her.

"Yes, yes," Prudence said earnestly. "It is just the money—nothing more. We must not let an innocent man suffer. And, 'Aunt' Sarah, we must prevail upon George to let us stop Hervey's mouth. That is our chief difficulty. You will help me—you and mother. You are so clever, 'Aunt' Sarah. George will listen to you. Oh, we must—must save him, even against himself."

Sarah nodded her head sagely; she was deeply affected by all she had heard, but she gave no outward sign.

"Child," she replied, "we will all do our best—for him—for you; but yours is the tongue that will persuade him best. He loves you, child, and you love him. He will not persist, if you are set against it."

"I hope it will be as you say," replied Prudence

dubiously. "But when he comes you will let him tell his story in his own way. You will listen patiently to him. Then you can laugh at his determination and bring your arguments to bear. Then we will keep him until Hervey arrives, and we will settle the matter for ever. Oh, mother, I dread what is to come."

Mrs. Malling did not seem to be paying much heed, but, as the girl moved away from her side, she spoke. There was no grief, no anger in her voice now. She spoke quite coldly, and Sarah Gurridge looked keenly over at her.

"Yes, girl, we'll settle this rumpus, and—Hervey."

Prudence moved towards the door. She turned at her mother's words.

"I will go up-stairs," she said. "I want to think."

She opened the door and nearly fell against the dog Neche, who was standing outside it. There was a fanciful suggestion of the eavesdropper about the creature; his attitude was almost furtive. He moved slowly away, and walked with the girl to the foot of the stairs, where he laid himself down with a complacent grunt. The girl went up to her room.

"This day's doin's will be writ on my heart for ever," said the farm-wife plaintively, as the door closed behind her daughter.

"An' you see, Hephzibah, and let no eyes read of them, for there will be little credit for any one in those same doings," said Sarah solemnly.

Mrs. Malling hugged herself, and again began to rock slowly. But there were no signs of tears in her round, dark eyes. Now and again her lips moved, and occasionally she muttered to herself. Sarah heard the name "Hervey" pass her lips once or twice, and she knew that her old friend had been sorely stricken.

As the time for Iredale's arrival drew near, Prudence became restless. Her day had been spent in idleness as far as her farm work was concerned. She had chosen the companionship of Alice, and had unburdened her heart to her. But sympathetic and practical as her friend was, she was quite unable to help her.

As four o'clock drew near, however, Alice did the only thing possible. She took herself off for a walk down the Lakeville trail. She felt that it was better for everybody that she should be away while the trouble was on, and,

besides, she would meet her lover on his way to the farm, and give him timely warning against making his meditated stay for the night.

At the appointed hour there came the clatter of a pacer's hoofs at the front gate, and a moment later Prudence led her lover into the parlour. After a few brief words she hurriedly departed to summon her mother and Sarah. There was a significant solemnity in this assembling; nor was it lessened by the smuggler's manner. Even the wolfish Neche seemed impressed with what was happening, for he clung to the girl's heels, following her wherever she went, and finally laid down upon the trailing portion of her skirt when she took up her position beside her lover and waited for him to begin.

The opening was a painful one for everybody. Iredale scarcely knew how to face those gentle folk and recount his disgraceful story. He thought of all they had been to him during his long years upon the prairie. He thought of their implicit trust and faith in him. He almost quailed before the steady, honest eyes of the old people. However, he at last forced himself to his task, and plunged into his story with uncompromising bluntness.

"I am accused of murder," he said, and paused, while a sickly feeling pervaded his stomach.

Mrs. Malling nodded her head. She was too open to remain silent long.

"Of Leslie Grey," she said at once. "And ye needn't to tell us nothin' more, George. We know the yarn you are about to tell us. An' d'ye think we're goin' to believe any addle-pated scalliwag such as my Hervey, agin' you? Smuggler you may be, but that you've sunk to killin' human flesh not even a minister o' the Gospel's goin' to convince me. Here, I respects the man I give my hand to. Shake me by the hand, George—shake me by the hand." And the farm-wife rose from her chair and ambled across the room with her hand outstretched.

Iredale clasped it in both of his. And never in his life had he experienced such a burst of thankfulness as he did at that moment. His heart was too full to speak. Prudence smiled gravely as she watched this whole-hearted token of her mother's loyalty to a friend. Nor was Sarah backward in her expression of goodwill.

"Hephzibah 's right, George, and she speaks for both

of us. But there's work to be done for all that. Hervey 's to be dealt with."

"To be bribed," said Hephzibah uncompromisingly, as she returned to her seat.

Iredale shook his head and his face set sternly. Prudence saw the look she feared creep into her lover's eyes. She opened her lips to protest, but the words remained unspoken. She had heard the rattle of a buckboard outside. The sound died away, and she knew that the vehicle had passed round to the barn. She waited in an agony of suspense for her brother's appearance.

"You needn't to shake your head," went on the farmwife. "This matter's my concern. It's my dollars as is goin' to pay Master Hervey—an' when he gets 'em may they blister his fingers, I sez."

Prudence heard a footstep in the hall. The crucial moment had arrived, and her heart palpitated with nervous apprehension. Before Iredale could reply the door was flung open, and Hervey stood in their midst. Instantly every eye was turned upon him. He stood for a moment and looked round. There was a slight unsteadiness in his attitude. His great eyes looked wilder than ever, and they were curiously bloodshot. At least one of the three ladies possessed an observant mind. Sarah saw that the man had been drinking. To her the signs, though slight, were unmistakable. The others did not seem to notice his condition.

"Ah," he said, with an attempt at pleasantry, "a nice little party. Well, I've come for the dibs."

His eyes lit upon the figure of George Iredale, and he broke off. The next moment he went on angrily—

"What's that man doing in this house?" he cried, his eyes fairly blazing with sudden rage. "Is the place turned into a refuge for—murderers?"

The man's fury had set fire to the powder train. His mother was on her feet in a twinkling. Her comfortable body fairly shook in her indignation. Her face was a flaming scarlet, and her round eyes sparkled wickedly.

"And who be you to question the calling of my house, Hervey Malling?" she cried; "since when comes it that you've the right to raise your voice against my guests? An' by what right d'ye dare to accuse an innocent man? Answer me, you imp of Evil," she demanded. But she

gave him no time to speak, and went on, her voice rising to a piercing crescendo. "Spare your wicked tongue, which should be forked by reason of the lies as has fallen from it. Oh, that you should be able to call me 'mother.' I'd rather mother the offspring of a rattlesnake than you. What have you done by us all your life but bring sorrow an' trouble upon those who've done all that which in them is to help you? Coward! Traitor! An' you come now with lies on your tongue to harm an innocent man what's done you no harm." She breathed hard. Then her wrath swept on, and the room rang with the piercing pitch of her voice. "You've come for your blood-money—your thirty pieces. You villain; if your poor father were alive this day he should lay a raw hide about you till your bones were flayed. Snakes! I've a mind to set about you myself. Look at him, the blackheart! Look at him all! Was ever such filth of a man? and him my son. Blood-money! Blood-money! And to think that I'm living to know it."

She paused. Hervey broke in—

"Silence, you old fool! You don't know what you're talking about. That man," pointing over at Iredale, who sat waiting for an opportunity to interfere, "is the murderer of Leslie Grey. I suppose he has been priming you with blarney and yarns. But I tell you he murdered Grey. I'm not here for any tomfoolery. I got Prudence's message to say the money was forthcoming. Where is it? Fifteen thousand dollars buys me, and that I want at once. If I have any more yapping I'll make it twenty thousand."

He looked about him savagely, and his eyes finally paused at George Iredale, seated beside Prudence. He cared nothing for his mother's vituperation, but he was watchful of the smuggler.

Suddenly the burly rancher sprang to his feet. He stepped up to Hervey. The latter moved a pace back.

"Not one cent, you cowardly hound!" he roared. "Not one cent shall you have; do you hear? I thank God that I am here to stop you robbing these, your mother and sister." Mrs. Malling tried to interfere, but he waved her back. "I've come at the right time, and I tell you that you shall not take one cent of the money. I will never leave you lest you should wheedle it from them. I will spoil your game. This is what I intend to do. You and I will set out for Winnipeg to-night, and together we

will interview the Commissioner of Police. Do you understand me? I have the whip hand now. And I promise you your silence shall *not* be bought."

Prudence interfered.

"Listen to me, George. I implore you not to do this thing. Hervey can have all he wants—everything. You are innocent we know, but you cannot prove your innocence. Why should you break my heart when there is a way out of the difficulty? There is but one person who can denounce you, and his silence we can purchase. Oh, George," the girl went on passionately, "as you love me, listen. My heart will break if this thing you meditate comes to pass. Oh, my love, say you won't do it! Let mother pay the man off that he may pass out of our lives for ever. See, mother is going for the money now. It is so easy; so simple."

Mrs. Malling had risen from her seat and moved away to the door. Hervey stood at the far end of the parlour facing the open window. He saw his mother pass out, and a great look of satisfaction came into his eyes. After all, these women meant to treat him fairly, he thought.

He grinned over at Iredale.

"Better drop it, Iredale, and don't play the fool. When I get the money I shall forget that I ever knew you."

The smuggler was about to fire a swift retort when the sound of voices coming in at the open window interrupted him. The voices were a man's and a woman's. Prudence recognized Alice's tones. The other's she did not recognize at once.

Sarah Gurridge, who had been a silent observer of the scene, had heard the sound too, but she was absorbed in what was being enacted about her. Her eyes were upon Hervey. She saw him start, and his great haunting eyes were turned upon the window. Suddenly he rushed forward towards it. He had to pass round the table, close to where Prudence was now standing. In doing so he kicked against the dog, which was standing with its ears pricked up and its head turned in the direction whence the voices sounded.

The man's evil face was blanched. A wild, hunted look was in his eyes. Iredale saw, was startled, and his reply died upon his lips as he wondered at this sudden change.

"Shut the window. Do you hear?" cried Hervey excitedly. "Don't let them hear. Don't let them——"

He had reached the window to carry out his own instructions. His hands were upon the casements, and he was about to fling the glass frames together. But suddenly his arms dropped to his sides. He stood face to face with the figure of Robb Chillingwood!

There was a dreadful silence. Then slowly Hervey backed away; his glaring eyes were fixed upon the stern countenance of the ex-Customs officer. Slowly he backed, backed from the apparition; and the onlookers noted the pallid cheeks and blazing eyes, and they wondered helplessly. Nor did Hervey pause until he reached the wall furthest from the window. Then he stood, and his lips silently moved.

Suddenly there was a cry, and it rang with vengeful triumph. It came from the man at the window—Robb Chillingwood.

"By God! it's Zachary Smith!"

The next instant and he was in the room.

The onlookers gazed blankly from one to the other of the two men. What did it mean? Who was Zachary Smith? And why did Robb so call Hervey? Then their eyes settled on the man against the wall. The cheeks were no longer pallid; they were flushed with a hectic colouring, and those strange eyes were filled with an awful, murderous light. The lips continued to move, but he did not speak; only his right hand slipped round behind him.

Then Robb's voice sounded through the room again.

"So, Mr. Zachary Smith, we meet again. And, by the Lord Harry, you shall swing for what you did in the mountains! Highway robbery of the Government bullion under the charge of Leslie Grey, and the murder of our Indian guide, Rainy-Moon." Then he turned—"Hold that door!" he shouted; and Iredale sprang to obey.

"But——" Prudence rushed forward, but Sarah stopped her and drew her back.

A wild laugh came from Hervey's direction.

"And who's going to take me?" he cried. "You, Robb Chillingwood, you? Ha, ha!" and his maniacal laugh rang out again. "Look to yourself, you fool. Grey crossed my path, and he paid for it with his life. You shall follow him."

While his words yet rang upon the air his hand shot out from behind him, gripping a heavy revolver. The pistol was raised, and a shriek went up from the two ladies,

Suddenly there was a rush, a snarl; and a great body seemed to literally hurl itself through the air. A shot rang out; simultaneously a cry echoed through the room; Hervey staggered as something seized him by the throat and tore away the soft flesh; another shot followed.

It all happened in a twinkling. Hervey fell to the ground with a gurgling cry, and Neche, the dog, until then forgotten by everybody, rolled over by his side with one dying yelp of pain. Then silence reigned throughout the room and all was still.

Iredale returned his smoking pistol to his pocket, and went over to Hervey's side. His movements seemed to release the others from the spell under which they had been held. Robb, unharmed by Hervey's shot, came forward, and Sarah and Prudence followed in his wake. But Iredale waved the ladies back.

"Stand away, please," he said quietly. "The dog had finished him before I got my shot in to save him. The brute has literally torn his throat out." Then he looked over at the dead hound. "It's awful; I wonder what made the dog turn upon him?"

"Are they both dead?" asked Robb, in an awe-struck voice.

Iredale nodded.

"It must have been the sight of Hervey's levelled pistol that made the dog rush at him," said Prudence. "I've seen him do so before."

"Strange, strange," murmured Iredale.

"That dog feared firearms," said Sarah.

"Perhaps he had reason," observed Robb significantly, "he only has three sound legs. My God! And not content with his victims in the mountains, he—— But, yes, I see it. This man came here without expecting to meet Grey or me." Robb broke off and looked at Prudence. "Of course, I am beginning to understand. You and Grey were to have been married." Then he turned back to the contemplation of the dead bodies.

"Yes, the murderer of Grey lies confessed," said Iredale quietly, "and I think that his motives were even stronger than those attributed to——"

Prudence placed a hand over his mouth before he could complete his sentence.

They were startled from their horrified contemplation

of the work of those last few moments by the sound of Hephzibah's voice calling from her bed-room. The sitting-room door had been opened by Alice, who had entered the moment Iredale had released the handle. Now they could hear the farm-wife moving about overhead, evidently on her way down-stairs.

Sarah was the first to recover her presence of mind. She turned upon Robb.

"Not a word to her about—about——"

Robb shook his head.

Iredale snatched the pistol from the dead man's hand.

Mrs. Malling's footsteps came creaking down the stairs. Suddenly Prudence's hands went up to her face as she thought of the shock awaiting her mother. Alice dragged her away to a chair. Iredale and Robb stood looking down at the two objects on the floor. Master and hound were lying side by side.

Sarah ran to the door and met the farm-wife. She must never know that her son was a murderer—a double murderer.

Those within the room heard the school-ma'am's gentle tones.

"No no, Hephzibah, you must not go in there yet. There are things—things which you must not see. The hound has killed him. Hervey enraged the dog, and the wretched beast turned upon him—and he is dead."

Then there came the sound of a scuffle. The next moment mother Hephzy pushed her way into the room. She looked about her wildly; one hand was clutching a bundle of hundred-dollar bills. Suddenly her round, staring eyes fell upon the two objects lying side by side upon the ground. She looked at the hound; then she looked upon her son. Iredale had covered the torn throat with pocket-handkerchiefs.

The bills slowly fell in a shower from her hand, and her arms folded themselves over her breast. Then she looked in a dazed fashion upon those about her, muttering audibly.

"He's dead—he's dead," she repeated to herself over and over again. Then suddenly she ceased her repetitions and shook her head. "Mussy-a-me, mussy-a-me! The Lord's will be done!"

And she slowly fell in a heap by her dead son's side.

IN CONCLUSION

TIME, the great healer of all sufferings, all sorrows, can do much, but memory clings with a pertinacity which defies all Time's best efforts. Time may soften the poignancy of deep-rooted sorrow, but it cannot shut out altogether the pain of a mother's grief at the loss of an only son. In spite of all Hervey's crimes he was "the only son of his mother, and she was a widow." The story of his villainies was rigidly kept from her, and so she thought of him only as a prodigal, as a boy to be pitied, as one whose offences must be condoned; she sought for his good points, and, in her sweet motherly heart, saw a wonderful deal in him on which to centre her loving memory, which, had he lived, even she could never have discovered. It is something that erring man has to be humbly grateful for, that women are like this; so full of the patient, enduring love which can see no wrong in the object of their affections.

But Loon Dyke Farm became intolerable to Hephzibah Malling after the ghastly tragedy of her son's death; and when Robb and Alice saw fit to marry, urged on to that risky experiment by the two older ladies, she insisted upon leasing the place to them on ridiculously easy terms. She would have given it to them only for their steady refusal to accept such a magnificent wedding gift from her.

The old lady was rich enough for her needs and her daughter's, and, business woman as she was, she was generous to a fault where her affections were concerned. Prudence too was satisfied with any arrangement which would take her away from the farm. Knowing what she knew of her brother, Loon Dyke could never again be her home. So mother and daughter retired to Ainsley, and only once again did they return to their old home on the

briefest of visits, and that was to assist at the function of christening the son and heir of the Chillingwoods.

Later on Prudence induced her mother to make Winnipeg her home, but though, for her daughter's sake, she acceded to the request, she was never quite at ease among her new surroundings. Nor was Sarah Gurridge, when she visited her old friend during her holidays, slow to observe this. "My dear," she told Alice, one day after her summer vacation, "Hephzibah is failing fast. She's quite old, although she is my junior by two years and three months. An idle life doesn't suit her; and as for Prudence, she wears fine clothes, and goes out in society all day and most of the night, but she's that thin and melancholy that you wouldn't know her for the same child. It's my opinion that she's pining—they are both pining. I found a letter from Hamilton when I got back home. It was from George Iredale, and I'm going to answer it at once."

"And what are you going to say in your reply?" laughed Alice. "I know your matchmaking propensity. So does Robb."

The quiet, dreamy face of the old school-mistress smiled over at the happy mother.

"Say?" she exclaimed. "I'm going to give George a piece of my mind for staying away so long. I know why he's doing so, and my belief as to the cause of his absence is different from what Prudence is beginning to imagine. She thinks he has left her because of her brother's doings, and it's that that's driving her to an early grave. I shall certainly tell George what I think." And Sarah wagged her head sagely.

And she was as good as her word. She had not seen fit to tell Alice that she had been in constant communication with George Iredale ever since the day of the tragedy, or that she was in his confidence as regarded Prudence. George had left the district to give both Prudence and her mother time to recover from the shock. And now that a year or more had passed away, he had written appealing to Sarah to tell him if she thought the time auspicious for his return.

In a long, carefully-worded letter Sarah advised him not to delay.

"By dint of much perseverance," she wrote, "I have persuaded the child out of her absurd notions about the reflections her brother's doings have cast upon her. She looks at things from a healthier standpoint now. Why should she not marry? What has she done to debar her from fulfilling the mission which is appointed for every woman? Nothing! And I am sure if a certain man should return and renew the appeal which he made at the time when the Lord's anger was visited upon her brother, she would give him a different reply. However, I must not waste all my space upon the silly notions of a child with a misdirected conscience."

And how her letter bore fruit, and how George Iredale returned and sought Prudence in the midst of the distractions of Winnipeg's social whirl, and how the girl's answer, when again he appealed to her, turned out to be the one Sarah had prophesied for him, were matters of great satisfaction to the sage old school-mistress.

She assisted at the wedding which followed, she saw the bride and bridegroom off at the railway depôt, she remained to console her old friend for the loss of her daughter. Then she hied her off once more, back to the bleak, staring school-house, where she continued to propound sage maxims for the young of the district until her allotted task was done, and the tally of her years complete.

THE END

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