

**COMPLETE**

# **NORTHWEST**

## **NOVEL**

*MAGAZINE*

**15¢**

**JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD  
GEORGE MARSH  
WM. BYRON MOWERY**

**AUG.**

**"FORBIDDEN  
VALLEY"**

**COMPLETE  
75,000 WORD**

**NOVEL** *by*

**WM. BYRON  
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*Author of*

**"SERGEANT TERRIBLE"**





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# COMPLETE • NORTHWEST NOVEL MAGAZINE

Vol. I, No. 6

MICHAEL IVAN, *Editor*

August, 1936

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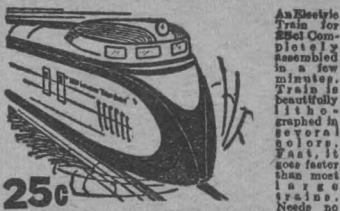
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Later, glancing through a magazine, she read how a lonely girl became popular by learning to play through the U. S. School of Music home study course. Betty sent for the Free Demonstration lesson.



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## CHAPTER I

**T**HE hotel manager glanced up, stared for a moment at the weather-bronzed man beside the registry desk, then suddenly recognized him.

"Why, how d'you do, Mr. Tennyson! I didn't know you at first, you've changed so. Glad to have you with us again, sir." His tones implied that a man who had been down in the far North hunting wolves by plane over the snowy wastes of the Great Barrens, was lucky to be back in

Edmonton alive. "Mr. Desplaines is with you, I suppose. Would you like something nice, a three-room suite?"

"Make it one room," Curt bade, for he had less than fifty dollars, and his partner had nothing. He signed for himself and Smash Desplaines. "By the way, Lacelle, will you ask the desk clerk to phone around to the other hotels and find out where Mr. A. K. Marlin is staying? Superintendent Marlin of the Mounted Police. He was to get in from Vancouver yesterday."

"He and Miss Rosalie are right here

# FORBIDDEN VALLEY

A Complete 75,000 Word Novel by  
**William Byron Mowery**

(Author of "Sergeant Terrible")



with us, Mr. Tennyson. That reminds me"—Lacelle turned and reached a letter from the mail rack—"the superintendent asked me to hand you this when you registered. If you're having conferences with him, I'll give you a room near his suite."

Curt ripped the envelope and read Marlin's letter. It was brief, puzzling.

DEAR CURT:

As I wirelessed you at Fort Resolution, Rosalie and I'll be in Edmonton for several days; and I'd like to see you as soon as you

come in from Great Slave. I hear that the Consolidated Minerals have offered you a job. Don't tie up with them definitely till you get in touch with me; I've got a proposition of the utmost importance to talk over with you.

A-K

Curt frowned uneasily as he read the note again. Just what was this "proposition"? Hardly a bid for him to rejoin the Mounted Police; A-K surely knew he would never go back into the Force.

He told himself that if it had anything



to do with Police work he would refuse point-blank. He was through with Police work. He had given it seven years of his life, and that was enough.

With a slight limp, his relic of a war-time crack-up, he crossed the lobby to the elevator where a bellhop was waiting with his key and duffle bag.

A number of people, loitering over their morning newspapers, looked up, saw him, followed him with interested curious glances. His rough flying clothes and the goggled helmet in his hand told them he was an aviator. Thirty-two or -three, he was only medium tall, but as hardened as a range wolf, with lean jaw, thin ascetic lips and hawk-sharp gray eyes. Exposure to summer sun and winter woolly-whipper had weathered his face almost as dark as an Indian's. There was a quiet power about him which set him off from other adventurers of the North who occasionally appeared in the capital for a day or two. They were usually breezy, robust, likable; he was poker-faced and silent.

Upstairs in his room, Curt glanced out the window into the hotel court where the golden June sun lay like a benediction over the flower beds and promenade; and he marveled at the contrast between his world of today and his world of yesterday! Today an élite hotel; while yesterday at that same hour he and Smash and Paul St. Claire had been frying a whitefish for breakfast on the lonely muddy shore of Great Slave Lake!

After his year of absence he had looked forward eagerly to visiting the city again, but now that he actually was back he felt disappointed. The city jarred on him. The tinkle of a guitar across the court reminded him of Paul St. Claire at Fort Chipewyan, and a wave of nostalgia swept him. That savage beautiful land, with its mountains and blue lakes and foot-loose freedom, had become his home. After his harsh years Across and his seven unpleasant years in the Mounted, he had come into sunlit happiness down north.

Curious to know what A-K wanted of him so urgently, he bathed and shaved, changed to his "civilized" clothes, and stepped down to the Marlin suite.

**A**T his knock he heard a quick tripping footstep; the door opened an inch or two; he had a glimpse of Rosalie Marlin, her eyes still heavy with sleep.

The pretty frown on her face vanished instantly when she saw who had knocked. "Curt!" she cried, opening the door wide. "You? Five minutes ago I was *dreaming* about you, and here you are!" She flung her arms about him and stood tiptoe for his hug and kiss. "When did you get in?"

"Smash and I just got in. Our Fair-child is out at Cooking Lake. — We left Athabasca at two this morning—"

Rosalie whistled. "Six hundred miles, before other people are up! In the old days that same trip used to take Dads from Christmas till February!" She drew him in, shut the door with a deft touch of her toe. "Curt, you're looking so keen! I'm—I'm almost afraid of you. You're like a breath right out of the North!"

"And you"—he held her off at arm's length and surveyed her—"you're looking sweeter than ever, Rosalie. And still hitting off the old fast pace, I see." He gestured at the disordered room which spoke of her return from some party late last night. "Where's A-K—still asleep?"

"No. He got up early and went over to visit the detachment here in town. He'll be back any time. Let's sit down. Tell me all about everything—your wolf-hunting, prospecting, this job the Consolidated offered you, how long you're going to be in Edmonton, and—just everything."

Curt grinned at her tumbling questions. It was good to be chatting with Rosalie again. She was like Smash Desplaines, carefree, pleasant, a good companion for light-hearted hours. He had long since realized that he did not love her very wildly, but he had gone thirty-two years without meeting a girl he liked better than Rosalie Marlin.

"The wolf hunting," he answered her questions categorically, "was great; we bagged more than three hundred, and got nine thousand dollars bounty on 'em, but with gas at five to fifteen dollars a gallon down in that country, we just about broke even. The prospecting last summer and this spring was like most prospecting—a lot of hopes but not much luck. This Consolidated offer, it's pretty nice. The Consolidated is prospecting that country by air, and their field manager just got killed in a crack-up, so they offered me the place. I'd have ten machines and about sixty men in my charge."

"But does it pay anything?"

Curt thought her question rather pointed,

"Well, yes—seventy-five hundred a year."

"Are you going to take it?" she asked. And when Curt nodded: "Can't I go along? I'd love to spend a summer down there!"

Curt laughed at the very thought of city-loving Rosalie, who found it a hardship to spend a week-end at a resort lake, living down north in the savage sub-Arctic.

"Is this just a pop job, Curt, or will it last?" she queried. "And does it give you any chance to climb up to a real position with real money to it? A person has got to think about money a little bit. Dads never did. That's why he's never had a penny all his life."

It seemed to Curt, as he answered her questions as best he could, that Rosalie had become considerably harder and worldly-wiser than she had been a year ago. He could sense that lack of money was cramping her style and she was beginning to feel it.

Before he could ask her what this "proposition" of her father's was, the door opened and Superintendent Marlin, a ruddy-faced man of sixty with iron-gray hair and tired, stooped shoulders, came into the room.

The sight of the old officer sent a warm glow through Curt. During those seven years with the Police, Marlin had been his friend, a kind of second father to him. His engagement to Rosalie seemed a fitting climax to the understanding friendship between her father and himself.

"It's mighty good to see you again, son!" Marlin greeted, with a strong handclasp. "You're looking as fit as a high-power rifle! The North must have agreed with you tremendously, Curt."

Rosalie flitted into the next room to dress.

Marlin studied Curt searchingly. A year ago, when Curt Tennyson resigned from the Mounted, he had been a sick man. Not so much physically as in spirit. As head of Intelligence for the western divisions, he had led a hard life, fraternizing with gangster circles, following trails to European capitals, and living for months with the narcotic traffickers on the west coast. Three years of that work usually put a man on the rocks; but Tennyson had been in daily contact with it, and the very worst of it, for *seven* years.

"Thank God, you've come out of it, son!" Marlin thought fervently. A year in the far North, prospecting, flying, hunting

the gray phantom packs, had put him in shape again.

"Haven't had breakfast, Curt?" he asked. "Neither have I. Let's go down. We can talk there." He took a document from a locked brief case and thrust it into his pocket. "Rosalie'll excuse us; she has hers sent up."

As they went down the corridor he inquired, "What sort of an offer did the Consolidated make you, son?"

"Oh, nothing to write home about," Curt stalled, wanting to find out first what Marlin's "proposition" was. "It's just fair, and rather unexpected."

"When would you have to be on the job with them?"

"By the end of this week. The ice is out now, and the summer in that country is so short that every day counts."

MARLIN said nothing more just then. They went down to the breakfast room, found a window table to themselves. Marlin could see that Curt was eager about the Consolidated job, and for several reasons he hated to break into those plans. As he well knew, Curt's boyhood on that bleak Manitoba farm had been harsh and exigent; he had given seven years to the Mounted without ever having a dime ahead; and his year down north had been the first sunlit period in his whole life.

His affection for Curt prompted him to say nothing about this other matter. But necessity left him no choice. Last September a big case had burst upon the Vancouver division, their biggest since the war, and the worst failure in their history. The Silent Squad had worked on it all winter, he had worked on it himself, the Commissioner had sent two specials from Ottawa; but nobody had got anywhere with it. When he thought of the brilliant jobs that young Tennyson used to turn in, of his uncanny skill, of how they all used to depend on him in hopeless cases, he felt that Curt stood at least a chance on this search, where the others had long since thrown up their hands and quit.

"Curt"—he glanced around and lowered his voice, and then plunged directly into the business—"what I wanted to see you about is this: Over at Vancouver there was a man called Farrell, a speculator and promoter of the shady type. He gave out that he was an Englishman, but he's not. He's a Russian, and his real name is Karakhan,



Igor Karakhan. I'll give you a bit of his background. During the Soviet Revolution in '17 he got out of Russia and went to—to—"Marlin reached into his pocket for the document—"and went to—"

"Germany," Curt supplied laconically. He smiled at A-K's sudden start. "In Berlin, in 1920," he went on, coolly taking the story away from Marlin, "Karakhan had a hand in that Engelmeyer money-printing scandal. In Paris he swindled his fellow-*émigrés* on a confidence game and then cleared out for Buenos Aires—"

"Wait a minute!" A-K gasped. "Where—when—how under heaven did you get this data on him?"

"From the Justice Department of the States. I used to trade information with them. All of us international agents kept track of Karakhan. He had the predatory instincts of a criminal and the brains of a genius, and that's the devil's own combination."

Marlin leaned back, looked at Curt with amazed eyes. "Well! I thought I was pulling something out of the bag that'd be new to you. D'you know what Karakhan did in the Argentine?" he demanded, as though he expected to stump Curt.

Curt nodded. A glint came into his eyes at the mention of Karakhan's depraved business in Buenos Aires. In the Argentine capital the Russian had organized a commerce in Lithuanian girls, peasant girls from the starving provinces that the War had torn to pieces. He had spread his operations to a dozen South American cities and had been tremendously successful.

"Yes, I know, A-K. And I know what he did afterward, too. The League of Nations investigators got too hot after him, so he skipped north to Mexico and ran whisky to Los Angeles. The States nicked him for two schooners, and he came on to Vancouver. I was keeping tab on him there when I burned out and resigned."

Marlin did not speak till the waiter had refilled their water glasses and withdrawn. Then: "I've got a departmental report on him here, but there's no use showing it to you; you know as much about him already as our men who've worked nine months on the case."

"Let me see it."

Marlin handed over a ten-page dossier and six pictures. Curt glanced at the snaps, and studied one enlarged bust photo.

He was struck by the intelligence and dynamic power about Karakhan. A man of forty, tall and commanding, he did not look Russian at all. Except for a lustful expression about his mouth, he gave no suggestion of the crime trail that he had tracked across two continents.

"The Soviet G.P.U. want him as badly as we do," A-K. explained. "You see, his game in Vancouver was to pose as an agent of the Soviet foreign trade commission. He cleaned up a million that we know of, and his haul must have totaled twice that much. Last September, on the sixteenth or seventeenth, he cashed in and vanished like a puff of smoke."

Curt understood that A-K wanted him to run Karakhan down and arrest him. After so brazen a crime, the man's clean getaway must have dealt a serious blow to the reputation of the Royal Mounted.

As he looked out into the sun-splashed court, Curt felt a challenge in pitting himself against this international criminal who had outgenerated the police of half a dozen nations; and he was proud that the heads of the Mounted should have turned to him, an outsider now, when all other recourses had failed.

But then he thought of the far North, where he had found freedom and a healing solitude; and compared it with the dusty cities, the criminal circles, the jangly uproar of metropolitan centers where the Karakhan trail would lead him. More than that, he was afraid of the job for a secret personal reason. It might prove to be the first step back to the Mounted, back to the tyranny of duty where his conscience had been pulling him.

Marlin stirred his coffee musingly. "Curt, I wouldn't be asking this of you if the case was just ordinary. But it goes a lot deeper than merely capturing and punishing a criminal. You and I know that when some person makes a fat haul by theft or graft or shady deal, and gets by with it—we know what a pernicious influence it has on the man in the street. It breaks down his respect for law. He thinks, 'If a poor devil steals a basket of groceries, he gets juggled for a year, but let some big plutegewump steal a million and he goes scot-free.' Why, Curt, there in Vancouver last fall the wobbles along the waterfront used to catcall at us Mounted Policemen and ask us how much of a cut we got from Karakhan. If it wasn't for the public wel-

fare angle, I wouldn't ask you to help us out. It'll be a thank-you job; you'd merely get expenses and a special's pay. But you'd be doing a great good."

Moments ago Curt had made his decision. He would not take the job. He was going back down north.

"I'll think about it, A-K," he said evasively, "and—uh, let you know."

A-K shrugged his shoulders, the only show of his bitter disappointment. He knew that Curt was refusing him.

In a way he did not blame Curt. He thoroughly understood Curt's wish to go north again. His year down there had been happy, and he had richly deserved it. Yet, the refusal hurt. Not only because he had been banking heavily on Curt to get Karakhan, but because it showed him so clearly that Curt had changed a lot since his Police days.

He hated to see Curt swinging toward the playboy sort, typified by Smash Desplaines. In the last few weeks he had been quietly working to secure Curt one of the best positions in the province, a work which would give him scope for his abilities. If he was to see Tennyson established in that position, it had to be quickly. Unknown to Curt, unknown even to Rosalie, death had marked him—one year longer, two at the very most, his physician said. Now Curt was turning him down, not only on the Karakhan hunt but on this infinitely more important thing.

He felt very old and defeated.

At a familiar voice speaking their names, he and Curt looked around. Smash Desplaines was coming into the breakfast room. He was freshly shaved and his red hair was cropped close. He started across to join his partner and Marlin.

"Better not discuss Karakhan before him," Curt said quietly. "He's honest as daylight, of course, but he's got an unguarded tongue. We'll talk this over later, A-K."

In their room that evening Smash paused in his whistling to inquire, "You and Rosalie stepping out tonight, Curt?"

Curt turned from the north window. "Yes."

"That's the time! Soak up all the sociability you can while you're back in civilization. Where're you going?"

"Rosalie has some party lined up over near the University."

"Wish we were stepping out together. You and me, we could bust this man's town wide open. We'd start at one end of Jasper Avenue and roll the old street up into a tight curl, like a pine shaving!" And when Curt shook his head: "All right, then. But snakes!—I wish you'd come along."

He was sincere about wanting Curt; but also, and more to the point, he needed financial backing that evening. As he brushed his rebellious hair he reflected that on seventy-five cents he could take his girl to a two-bit show and then have coffee and doughnuts. Not a very wild or exciting prospect.

He thrust his watch into his pocket. His hand touched something crisp, like a bit of stiff paper. He pulled it out, glanced at it, stared at it.

"Hey!" He whirled on Curt. "Look at that! Am I drunk or dreaming?"

"What're you going into a tail-spin about?"

"Why—why," Smash gasped, "it's a twenty-dollar bill! In my pants pocket!"

"That is a strange state of affairs, for you," Curt remarked, not betraying himself by the flicker of an eyelid. "You probably left it in there last fall. You haven't had that civilized suit on since then."

"By gosh, I must have!" He did a jig dance in front of the mirror. "What I mean, this comes along in the thin nick of time to save me from embarrassment."

"Right," Curt agreed. "You couldn't entertain a girl on your good looks, for you haven't got any."

Finished dressing, Smash caught up his hat, took a last brush at his hair, and opened the door. "Well, jake-a-loo, old timer, I'm a vanishing American."

"Cheerio. Stay out of jail."

As Smash went whistling to the lift, Curt turned again and looked down, hands in pockets, at the light gleams on the river below. He was torn with indecision. His conscience hurt him about A-K. Over at Vancouver headquarters Marlin had needed him, needed young hands and a man he could trust; and he had deserted. And now he was refusing even to help on this Karakhan business. What were a few months of sacrifice compared to a whole lifetime of it, such as Marlin had given?

As he thought of A-K's career, his imagination drifted back across the decades to a time before he was born; when Assiniboine tepees clustered where office buildings now



stood, and the lights beneath him were swaying torches of the Blood dance, and over the horizon came the rolling thunder of buffalo herds chased by the hard-galloping Sioux. Blackfoot warred with Piegan, and the whisky trader corrupted both. Then across the prairies came riding a small band of men, wearing red tunics and yellow-striped trousers. *Shagalasha*—stern soldiers—they were called; and they earned the name. By heroic measures they set the land to rights and kept it so.

Many of that original band bought out of the Force and went into mining, ranching, lumbering. The raw land offered them a glorious opportunity to build personal fortunes, and they looked to their own interests. But A-K, and others like him, stuck with the Mounted. A-K had given forty long years to the Force, and now he did not even own a home for himself.

Somewhere in the city a chime sounded, breaking into Curt's reverie. He glanced at his watch, saw it was time for him to leave with Rosalie; and stepped down the corridor to the Marlin suite.

Marlin looked up from the table where he was working. "Rosalie's down in the lobby meeting some friends, Curt," he said kindly. "She'll be back in a minute." He laid his pen aside. "Curt, Rosalie told me the details about that Consolidated offer. If I'd known them beforehand, I wouldn't have mentioned this Karakhan matter."

CURT winced. A-K's very kindness and generosity hurt him all the worse. He suddenly realized that if he refused Marlin and went back north he would come near to losing his own self-respect.

"A-K"—he blurted out the fateful words impulsively, heedless of consequences—"I'm going after Karakhan! I came in here a minute ago swearing that I wouldn't; but I am; I've got to!"

Marlin pushed back his chair and stood up, staring at him.

"Why—why, Curt, you mustn't do that. I wasn't expecting you to at all. Don't do it on the spur of the moment. At least think it over—"

"I've thought it over. I can go back north afterward. This case means a lot to you and the Police and the public, and I ought to do my share."

Marlin reached out his hand. "You're still a Mounted, Curt. You always will be. You can't get away from it."

"I'm not 'still a Mounted,'" he denied. "I'm taking this on to pay back a little fraction of what I owe you, A-K, and because—well, I guess I'm part wolfhound and can't resist a good chase. If I run that fellow down it'll be worth half a dozen Consolidated jobs."

"There won't be any 'if,' Curt. You'll take him."

He tried to say it confidently, to hide his own doubts. At the best Curt had only an outside chance. The difficulties of the hunt were appalling. Yonder in that city of a hundred and thirty thousand a certain man had disappeared last fall. Shrewd detectives, men like Inspector Baldwin, had miserably failed to track him. The scent was cold, nine months cold. As immediate havens for Karakhan, down the west coast lay a score of cities ranging up to a million; and five days across the Pacific yawned all the teeming ports of the Orient.

And yet he was asking Curt to pick up that man's trail and run him to earth! Besides all those tremendous handicaps, Karakhan had always been a shade better than any man ever sent after him. He had the power of money, the advantage of a cold trail, and the whole world for his hiding place.

He wondered how Curt would go about the search. What methods could he use that hadn't been used already?

"Have you got any idea of how you're going about the business, Curt?"

Curt nodded. "I'm going to make use of his weak point."

"His weak point"—?"

"Women," Curt said tersely.

## CHAPTER II

EARLY the next morning he and Smash checked out at the hotel, ate breakfast, and taxied through the gray wet dawn to Cooking Lake.

At a private pier Curt's trim Fairchild was rocking on the wavelets. A three-place cabined plane, the sturdy ship had carried him and Paul and Smash all over the Keewatin barrens, up and down the water-logged Mackenzie country, and westward into the unknown Arctic Rockies. Across long "dry hops" where a konking motor would have meant a fatal crack-up, it had taken them unfalteringly, so that they had come to look on it as one of them, a silent partner.

While Smash pumped the pontoons dry, Curt stripped the canvas hood from the radial and inspected. Shoving away, they climbed into the cabin, cranked the inertia starter and stood out into the lake on low revv. At the controls, Curt skimmed north two miles to warm the motor, veered around into the light wind, and gave the plane the gun. Dancing down lake, he reached speed, rocked the stick, jumped the ship into the air and headed west, toward the snowy Selkirks and the Pacific Coast.

As he flew along, his eyes were on the horizon over the Fairchild's nose, but his thoughts went on beyond that horizon to the weeks and months ahead. He wondered where the Karakhan hunt would take him and what the veiled future held for him. But he felt that he had come into his own again, the man hunt, and for the first time in months he was conscience-easy.

Past Calgary and the Blackfoot Selkirks, they dropped down on Okanagan for gas and oil. Smash took the stick then, and they flew on, through the heart of the Rockies.

At Yale they struck the Fraser, followed it on west, and reached Vancouver an hour before noon.

After registering at the airport, Curt sent Smash to the Marlin home where A-K had invited them to stay while in the city. He himself went directly to Mounted headquarters.

Of his former associates on the Silent Squad the only two still there were Arnold Baldwin, now an inspector, and Duty-Sergeant Holden. The others had all been transferred to detachments where the work was less nerve-racking.

"So the Old Man clapped you on this case, eh?" Baldwin remarked. "Well, you're damned welcome, Tennyson."

At a desk in Baldwin's office he went over the whole Karakhan case with the inspector and Holden. Failing to trail Karakhan, the squad had planted inquiries in his old haunts, but the Cossack, wise in the way of a sheep-killing wolf, had not gone back.

When the conference ended, Baldwin tilted back in his chair and looked through his cigarette smoke at Curt.

"Well, Tennyson," he queried, "can you improve on our work?"

"I don't see how; you've done a real job, Arn," Curt said, rather absently. He was studying a picture on the desk, the pic-

ture of a black-haired girl of twenty-two. "This Mathieson girl"—he indicated the photo—"was she very well acquainted with Karakhan?"

Baldwin answered. "They were together a deal here in town, and took week-end trips up the coast."

"Is she still here in Vancouver?"

"Yes. Manages a beauty shop."

"Do you know her well enough to get me a date for this evening?"

"She won't date with a stranger."

"Try her. By the way, better use a fake name—Ralston will do. Curt Ralston. And I'm a flyer with the Consolidated Minerals."

Picking up the phone, Baldwin called a number and got Miss Mathieson.

"Helen? Arn Baldwin speaking. How are you? . . . Glad to hear that. I say, Helen, are you free this evening? Why I ask, I've a friend here in town, Curt Ralston, an aviator with a prospecting company. I wondered whether you wouldn't step out to dinner with him? You don't care to? But I wish you would, he's rather a close friend of mine, and I believe you'd like to know him. . . . You'll phone me later? Better make it 'yes' now, Helen. He's entirely a gentleman, you understand—otherwise I wouldn't have suggested this. Please. . . . You will? That's mighty sweet of you! . . ."

He set down the phone. "Seven o'clock at her shop, Curt. If you pick up anything new from her, I'll turn in my commission and get a job as a traffic cop. I did my damndest, but couldn't get a thing from her."

Curt thanked him, left headquarters, sent a box of flowers to the Mathieson girl, and went out to the Marlin home.

Smash was gone. He had slept a few hours, the housekeeper said; then had done some telephoning, changed clothes and left immediately. "Soaking up some more sociability," Curt thought.

Going out to the vine-clad porch with his pipe and the notes he had made at headquarters, he began blocking out his program in rough outline. The clean swift way of locating Karakhan was to trail him, to pick up his trail leading away from Vancouver and follow it.

After changing clothes, he taxied back to Kirk Street for his strange date with the Mathieson girl. In spite of what Baldwin had said he expected to find her a worldly-

wise creature of the gold-digger type. She must be a pretty shrewd thing, to run in Igor Karakhan's company; and he would have to handle her carefully. She might know nothing worth while, and then she might give him some priceless little clue.

HE walked into the reception room of the beauty parlor. On a lounge, a girl sat reading a magazine, a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl in a pretty black-and-white silk frock.

She laid the magazine aside and rose up. "Are you—you're Mr. Ralston, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes. Is Miss Mathieson ar—?"

"I'm Helen Mathieson," she said.

The surprise nearly floored Curt. She was so exactly the opposite of all his expectations. Her girlish dignity and her shyness toward him, a stranger, completely blasted his former uncharitable opinion of her.

He took her to dinner at a restaurant garden, and they had a short dance afterward. Wanting a quiet talk, which was impossible at a theater, he suggested a canoe ride. They taxied to the Park, rented a canoe and drifted out upon the lagoon.

At the first of their talk he tried to find out what lay behind Baldwin's attempt to shield her that afternoon. He discovered that Baldwin took her out frequently, in fact kept rather steady company with her.

Deftly leading the topic from Baldwin to Baldwin's work, he casually mentioned the Karakhan case and got her started talking about it. Almost immediately he discovered that she had loved the Russian passionately and still loved him. She knew about the huge swindle he had worked, but with a woman's loyalty she forgave it. She knew he had callously thrown her aside—he had done so even before he fled, and had taken up with another girl in Victoria; but she forgave that too.

As gently as an inquisitor could, he went on with his probing. He found out that the continued high tension of Karakhan's game had wearied him; that during his last three months in Vancouver he had fished a lot in the Strait by way of recreation, and had gone week-ending up the coast. On these trips he had used a plane. He owned none himself, but chartered one privately. Though a pilot went along, Karakhan usually handled the controls himself. He

flew very competently, Miss Mathieson said.

Curt's pulse quickened at this information about the plane jaunts. He was working on the theory that Karakhan had escaped by air. Train or auto was entirely too public for so shrewd a criminal, and he would hardly have taken ship away when a wireless flash could have intercepted him in mid-ocean and caught him dead to rights. But a plane was swift; it took to the trackless sky; in two hops a man could jump clear across the continent. The Silent Squad had found out about his flights but had set them down as ordinary business trips. Plainly they were not that.

After taking Helen Mathieson home, he jotted down the information she had given him, then hurried out to the Marlin residence and planned his next steps.

The following day he interviewed several of Karakhan's acquaintances and three prominent aviators of the city. They could tell him almost nothing of value and he turned to Helen Mathieson again, taking her out that evening on a long motor-canoe trip in the Strait. It was she who innocently gave him the little broken bits of information and the stray trivial details that he pieced together into the story of Karakhan's escape.

The following morning he walked in on Baldwin and Sergeant Holden at Mounted headquarters.

"Here in Vancouver," he informed them, "there is, or was, a young flyer called Jim Gunnar. He had a Speedair of his own, a cabined job with pontoons, and he kept it at the airport. He and Karakhan went up together two or three times a week, and Karakhan used his ship exclusively. While I'm working on another lead, I wish you'd investigate him, Holden, and get all the information you can."

Holden left on the assignment. Late that afternoon he returned, bringing dismal news. Young Gunnar, he reported, had bought a new six-place Bellanca last October and started freelancing up the Alaskan coast. Just a month ago he had smacked up at Baranoff Island. A whaling boat had taken him to a hospital at Novonesky, but he had died without regaining consciousness.

The report was a blow to Curt. If Karakhan really had escaped by plane, young Gunnar was the logical person to have taken him. Now Gunnar was dead,



and the information he might have given was forever lost.

"What was he doing on the sixteenth and seventeenth of last September, Holden?"

"On the sixteenth his ship was housed at the airport. On the seventeenth he cleared for Nanaimo. It was a stormy foggy day. No other planes cleared and none came in."

"Did he take a passenger?"

"No. I'm sure of that because the airport manager checks on ships. We're so close to the Border that they have to be strict with inspections. He cleared by himself."

"Did you check on him arriving at Nanaimo, Holden?" Curt persisted.

"I phoned 'em, but they don't keep records there, and they have too many planes in and out to remember any particular one."

"How much gas did he take on here?"

Holden glanced at a paper. "Eighty-five gallons."

Curt toyed with a letter knife. "About this matter of Gunnar clearing by himself," he said presently, "he could easily enough have picked Karakhan up, somewhere out in the Strait. As for his going to Nanaimo, he never went there at all and never intended to. He lied. That Speedair of his, on floats, could just barely get off with eighty-five gallons of gas. Nanaimo is only sixty miles from here. Would a pilot ever tank up to capacity for a forty-five minute hop? You can bank on it, he was planning a flight of seven or eight hours."

"Now, why did he lie about his clearance and take on such a big load? And why should a private plane, which wasn't schedule-bound, venture up on a day when the commercial companies canceled their flights and no planes could get in? I'll tell you why—Jim Gunnar had important business on hand that day! And one other question: Where did this youngster, who was just an ordinary barnstormer—where did he suddenly get the eighteen thousand dollars for a new Bellanca?"

**B**ALDWIN and Holden exchanged glances of dismay. They had worked nine months on that case, and here came along a person who had struck a hot scent almost at once.

"Don't jump to conclusions," Baldwin argued. "Gunnar might just have been flying a plane-load of whisky to an Indian camp or smuggling something across the

Border. A lot of foreigners are taken into the States by air from here."

"Maybe so. I'm merely saying that the trip looks suspicious to me. Holden, did that record give you any hint of where he did go?"

"Nothing whatever. The plane just went away into the fog."

"You're sure there's no clue?"

"Dead sure. You can see for yourself. I made a copy of the clearance record."

Curt looked at the hastily scribbled sheet. Gas and oil were the first two items. Then followed a few trifling purchases—cigarettes, chocolate bars, a box lunch.

"That lunch," he commented, "ought to have put a person wise that Gunnar intended to stay in the air for several hours. You don't take a lunch along on a forty-five minute crow-hop." His finger moved on down and stopped at an entry which read NC-5, 50c. "What's this item, Holden?"

"Some gadget for the plane, I suppose."

Curt believed so too, but he took nothing for granted. He reached the phone, got the airport and asked the parts man what NC-5, 50c. meant on a bill.

"That? Oh, that's for a Geology Service map—they strip maps that you hang inside the cabin on a roller and roll up or down as you fly along. That NC-5 chart covers the section from Chilcotin north to the Grand Trunk. Is that all you wanted to know?"

"Quite all," said Curt. "Thanks."

Baldwin whirled angrily on Holden. "What a blighted timbertop, you! 'Dead sure—nothing whatever'—when the record held a clue like that! And you even copied it!"

Holden's face reddened. Curt interposed: "It's all right, Holden. I caught that because I know something about planes. Arn, send a constable down to get one of those NC-5 charts, won't you?"

When the chart came, he spread it on a table for a careful study. The map covered a strip seventy-five miles wide by four hundred long, ending at the Grand Trunk Railroad in northern British Columbia. Red dots showed where pilots could secure gas, and stars where some sort of mechanical service could be expected.

In that thinly settled country there were only two stars and fourteen dots.

Before leaving, that afternoon, he wrote

night letters and sent them to all the places that he could reach by wire.

When he walked into Mounted headquarters the next morning, a pile of yellow envelopes lay on Baldwin's desk. Baldwin picked up one lying by itself and handed it to him.

"You're an uncanny devil, Tennyson," he said "If I had your luck I'd be Premier."

The telegram came from one of the starred places, a little town called Tellacet, at the junction of the Grand Trunk and the Lilluar River. A thrill ran through Curt as he read the electric words:

PLANE YOU DESCRIBED LANDED HERE  
ON AFTERNOON SEVENTEENTH STOP  
CARRIED PILOT AND PASSENGER STOP  
LEFT ON MORNING EIGHTEENTH STOP  
DESTINATION UNKNOWN

Within an hour Curt and Smash were flying north in the Fairchild, heading for Tellacet.

AT the Edmonton hotel Marlin was surprised to have Smash Desplaines breeze in on him one afternoon three days later.

"Hello, Smash! Where's Curt?"

"Over in northern B.C. At a little jerk-water called Tellacet. He sent you this letter."

Marlin slit the envelope hastily. Good news this soon? Impossible!—even for Tennyson.

The message was in the numeral code of the Silent Squad. He sat down at the table and began deciphering it. The laconic sentences staggered him as he worked them out.

DEAR A-K:

Baldwin and I picked up Karakhan's trail at Vancouver. A flyer called Gunnar brought him north to this place. Karakhan then sent Gunnar out by train and went on north by himself in the plane. I suppose he was too cautious to let anybody know his exact destination.

I have reason to believe that he's hiding somewhere in the Lilluar Mountains. A hundred miles north of here is a post called Russian Lake, the jumping-off place for the Lilluars. I intend to go there and try to trace him farther. Since a plane in that country would arouse suspicion, Smash will stand by here at Tellacet with the Fairchild, to be on hand if needed; and the rest of the work will be done by canoe.

By the way, don't mention Karakhan to Smash. He knows I'm hunting a man, but

it isn't wise to trust him with any particulars.

After he hands you this, he is flying over to Athabasca to get Paul St. Claire and fetch him here. I need help on this, and Paul is the only person on earth whom I can trust absolutely. If this turns out to be a wilderness hunt, Paul will be worth ten ordinary men.

So far at least it *was* a woman.

CURT

### CHAPTER III

A THOUSAND yards off the north shore of Russian Lake, Curt and Paul stopped paddling a few minutes and gazed ahead at the trading post, looking the place over before they landed.

The post lay at the mouth of the Lilluar River, a big mountain stream which had its origin three hundred miles north, near the Yukon headwaters. Small and unimportant, the trading station consisted of a gaunt frame mission, a whitewashed Mounted Police cabin and a red-roofed Hudson's Bay store. Five trapper and prospector tents were strung out down the landwash; several *métis* shacks stood back at the wood's edge, and the leather tepees of a dozen Indian families reached up along the river bank beyond the mission.

The sun had already slanted down behind the northwest ranges. In the evening hush the lake was as still as a mirror, but far-away west a mass of black thunderheads promised a rainstorm before many hours.

A small group of people, gathered in front of the Bay store, were looking at the canoe and pointing; and several men had strolled out upon the little pier to meet it. The post was so wilderness-buried that two strangers in a boat caused a big stir.

Paul gave the canoe a stroke to keep it headed straight. "I wonder whether Mam'selle Luck or Dame Malheur is waiting for us yonder, *compagnon*." He spoke in French, as he always did with Curt.

"That's what I'm wondering, Paul. We're walking into a big blank question here. We haven't a ghost of an idea where Karakhan is hiding. He may be close to this place or two weeks' foot-slogging back in that God-forsaken *bois fort*. See those people there? Well, any of them may be a spy of his. He's almost got to have a contact man. We'll have to watch every step we take."

Paul nodded, scrutinizing the post with his sharp eyes. A slender young *métis* of

twenty-three, he belonged to the old and fine clan of Athabaskan St. Claires, descendants of the proud "Timber Cree" and the old French *voyageur*—fighter, lover and far-wanderer. Born to the Strong-Woods, he was as bush-wise as a pine marten or a timber wolf; and his incredible marksmanship made campfire stories in a country where the rifle was the traditional weapon and deadly marksmanship was common. Between him and Curt a deep silent partnership had grown up during their year of foot-loose wandering. They were of different blood, different race and training, yet when the ebb and flow of chance had brought them together in the far North, they had recognized a brotherhood in the intangible things that counted. Though Smash had been with them and was one of the three, he was shut out of that deeper partnership. He was too shallow and casual.

As they drew near the landing Curt looked down the shore seven hundred yards and saw four old stone houses in the middle of a second-growth clearing. He knew what they were. An ancient Russian fur post, located there when Washington was leading the new-born American Republic, it was a relic of the days when Russia ruled western America from Nome to northern California. The four stone structures, rearing above the second growth, were half-hidden by wood vines and wild ivy, much as their actual history had been overgrown with tale and superstition.

The canoe nosed in to the pier. Paul jumped out and lapped the painter around a cleat. As Curt tossed their duffle on the planking, he purposely made a display of their two gold pans and short-handled shovels. Among the men watching them a trapper nudged another and remarked, "Prospectors, John." Heads nodded. It was as Curt had wished—let them draw their own conclusion.

He introduced Paul and himself to the old trapper called John, who then introduced them to the others. As Curt shook hands around, he sized up the men swiftly. Corporal Hodkins, the Mounted Policeman, was a stolid, negligible fellow who would be neither a help nor hindrance. Missioner Lespérance was a youngish scholar with the eyes of a mystic. Besides the Bay factor, Higginbotham, there were three young trappers, a *bona fide* prospec-

tor, a man called Ralph Nichols and a middle-aged city sportsman with a brassy voice and know-everything manner.

The Indian men, standing off by themselves, were a shabby vacant-faced lot. Under a fish scaffolding just ashore seven half-breeds were smoking, drinking, quarreling. Hodkins was a poor excuse of a Mounty, Curt thought, to let men drink openly in Indian territory.

The man Nichols, quiet and unobtrusive, was the most interesting of the group. No outdoors person at all but plainly from the city, he appeared to be some minor government official or a teacher vacationing in the mountains.

Curt liked him from their first hand-clasp. And that liking never grew less, in the days they were to spend together. He little knew or foresaw that he was destined to travel a long path with Ralph Nichols and be with him, his only friend, when Ralph lay dying beside a lonely campfire.

"Didn't I meet you over at Chipewyan once?" he asked, to draw Nichols out.

"No, I never was there." With his reticent smile Nichols added, "I'm a prospector for bugs—an entomologist."

"I see. I don't suppose you've got much competition in this country." He invited, "Come down to our place later on and have a mug of tea with us, Nichols."

Picking up their duffle, he and Paul went down the shore to make camp.

Midway between the modern post and the old ruins they found a suitable spot close to the woods edge, and began pitching their tent.

Nearer the old *vedette* now, Curt could see the narrow musket-slit windows, the platforms for mounting small brass cannons, and all the fortlike arrangement of the ruins. It had been more a garrison than a fur post, for the Cossack *promyshleniki* had not been traders but extorters of tribute, and they had needed defense. The main building, the big *ostrog*, was tumbling to decay; the prison house had been struck by a blast of lightning. No tepee or cabin stood near the ancient post; its very vicinity was shunned like a haunted place.

PAUL started driving tent pegs. Curt stepped inside and began examining their duffle, to make sure he had overlooked no label or initialing which might give them away to a suspicious prowler. While



he was doing this, he heard Paul stop pounding and say "*Bon soir*" to someone. Glancing out the flap-front, he saw a girl go past, carrying a fish rod, creel and canoe paddle.

He had only a flitting glimpse of her, but that glimpse made him straighten up and stare. She was wearing a blue corduroy dress, laced moccasins, a tam, and a sweater blouse with one elbow worn through. Her hair was a brownish golden; she walked along with a lance-like erectness of body; and her face—he saw it only in profile—was so beautiful that he kept staring through the flap-front for moments after she had gone by.

When he finished and went outside she was already out upon the lake in a birch-bark canoe, skirling toward a cluster of wooded islets half a mile offshore. Trout-ing, he guessed. If she was anything of a fisherman she ought to snag some big ones in the shallows around those islands; but from the awkward way she handled the paddle she was plainly a tenderfoot.

He turned to Paul, who was watching her too. "Who is she, d'you know?"

"A stranger to me, to my regret."

The girl disappeared among the islands. Curt went on with the camp work. He stepped back into the timber to find a dead birch for fuel. The tropical luxuriance of the woods amazed him. The pines and cedars were lordly things, eight feet across the stump and towering above two hundred. The whole woods was dominated by moss. It carpeted the ground and wind-fall logs, ran over the boulders and up the tree trunks, and hung in festoons from the branches.

"I'm plain lucky," he thought gratefully, "to be hunting Karakhan in a country like this, instead of having to soft-shoe around through cities."

He pushed over a dead birch, dragged it back to camp, and told Paul: "I'd better step out to the trading store now and get the hang of things there, so that tonight we can do some scouting around. While I'm gone, you can be bringing our canoe from the pier."

When he returned, half an hour later, Paul was standing on the landwash. The young Canadian beckoned him down.

"That girl over among those *îles-là* is likely to experience trouble if we don't go over there."

"What's up?"

Paul told him. A few minutes after the girl had paddled in among the islands, one of those half-breeds had come down the shore, furtively secured a canoe on beyond the *ostrog*, and slipped across the water on her trail. He was drunk, Paul added.

Curt looked out at those low dim masses and swore in perplexity. If he went over there and interfered he would make an enemy of that half-breed, and it was bad policy to have enemies at Russian Lake. The girl should have known better than to wander away at twilight when irresponsible 'breeds were loafing about the post.

But still, she was a girl, alone out there. . . .

On the rocky tip of an island, where the waves lapped close to her moccasins, Sonya was having fine luck. In forty minutes she had caught eleven trout, some of them so big that their tails stuck out of her creel.

From time to time she glanced west at the looming storm. Streaked by snaky lightning, the black thunderheads had cut off the lingering afterglow of the sun. Between herself and the wooded part of the island stood a clump of lifeless pines, lifting their gaunt arms to the sky.

She flipped out her line for a last time. Something struck it, struck hard. The reel spun, her light rod tugged and whipped. Behind her at the woods edge a stealthy figure slunk out to the clump of pines, but Sonya's attention was all given to the fight on her hands and she did not notice. Not until she had reeled in the struggling seven-pounder did she become alive to her danger. She had seen nothing, heard nothing, but she sensed that she was no longer alone, and she whirled around.

Against the lighter background of the water she saw a man's head and shoulders between two of the dead pines.

In a flash she understood his intention; understood why he had followed her from the post and sneaked ashore so stealthily and cut her off from her canoe. Panic seized her, and the fishing rod dropped from her hands. For a moment she was overwhelmed by her desperate plight—the post so far away, those thunderheads drawing the curtain of night across the sky, and herself alone on the island with that man yonder.

With a great effort she fought down her panic and made herself think. It wouldn't do any good to plead with him; he was one of those drunken shameless 'breeds.

She had no weapon to fight him with, and in a physical struggle he could crush her one-handed. Her only chance was to outwit him somehow and get to her boat.

She let her creel and net lie, but picked up her rod again, and stepped back off the narrow tongue of rock where he had almost cornered her.

The man moved away from the pines and came nearer. He was lurching unsteadily. Sonya noticed that. She believed she stood a good chance to elude him, rush to her canoe and get it afloat before he could catch her. In order to have a strip of open sand for her dash, she moved toward the landwash.

"You t'ink you run 'way, *hein*?" the 'breed taunted, in a drunken chuckle. "Huh, dat *canot* of your, she all cut op to debbil! I slash her, *p'tite*, so you no get 'way. Me, I wise—no? You and me, we stay here on dis leetle islan'."

Sonya's heart stopped beating. Her canoe, down the landwash—he'd found it, wrecked it! She was caught, as helpless as a creature in a trap.

On beyond the pines two shadowy figures unexpectedly appeared out of the darkness of the spruces. Sonya thought they were confederates of the 'breed. Without a second's hesitation she whirled toward the water edge. She could hardly swim a stroke, but rather than remain there with those three she meant to strike out for the nearest island, two hundred yards away.

A sharp voice called to the 'breed. "I say, fellow, what the devil d'you think you're doing here?"

THE voice stopped Sonya in her tracks. "Oh-oo!" It was a wordless cry of thankfulness. She peered at the two figures as they came on. Strangers they were. They must be the two prospectors who had come to Russian Lake that evening.

The 'breed jerked around and stared blankly at the pair. With his brain all muddled by *houtchini*, he did not understand at first this sudden turn to things. But it did dawn on him finally. Caught dead to rights, he crouched like a cornered animal. And then, as those two figures stalked nearer and nearer, he went suddenly berserk. His hand dropped to his belt, whipped out a glittering hunting knife; and with a yell he lunged at the two.

The younger stranger drew an auto-

matic and leveled it at the 'breed. "*Arrêt!*" he snapped. "*Cachez cet couteau-là, vous!*"

"Put up your gun, Paul," the older stranger ordered. "I'll handle him and his frog-sticker."

Without a gun or knife or any weapon at all, he tensed himself to meet the vicious rush. Sonya trembled with fear for him. The 'breed was taller than he and much heavier; and that flashing knife was a wicked thing in a hand-to-hand battle.

But in the next few seconds something happened to the 'breed—happened so swiftly that Sonya could hardly follow it. As the 'breed's knife swished down, a hand shot out and seized his wrist and wrenched it till the weapon dropped. The stranger bent a little lower and turned his shoulder to receive the charge. There was a moment of impact. In the next instant the 'breed was lifted bodily and went somersaulting over his enemy's shoulder. Fairly flying through the air, he hit the ground thump on his back, with all the breath and fight knocked out of him.

Curt picked up the knife, flung it out into the water and looked at the 'breed. He was one of the *métis* at the fish scaffolding that afternoon, a powerfully built man, with bushy black hair, a stubble of coarse beard and the high cheekbones of an Indian. He looked like an intelligent fellow, well dressed and neat, and much above the average half-breed.

"Where's your canoe?" Curt demanded.

The *métis* gestured at the lower end of the islet. "Down dere in de bush." He fingered his empty knife-sheath sullenly.

"Go get his boat, Paul," Curt ordered. "We'll take it across to the mainland."

He turned to the girl, expecting to have a bad case of panic and tears on his hands when her reaction came. But the girl's coolness surprised him. She certainly had courage, he thought admiringly, even if she hadn't shown very much sense in coming over to that island alone.

"I'd better take you back to shore, Miss. Your canoe's a wreck. We saw it down there. It's not worth repairing."

The 'breed got to his feet. "W'y you tell dat yo'ng feller get my *canot*? W'at you go do wit' me?"

"I ought to pitch you into the lake, friend. But I'm not going to. A night on this island'll sober you up and teach you a lesson. You're lucky to get off so easy."

To smooth out the 'breed's enmity he added: "I'm not reporting this to the Yellow-stripe because I think you've ordinarily got more decency than you showed this evening. I'll beach your canoe below the old post where you got it; and I'll see that you're taken away from here in the morning."

He walked out on the rock thrust, got the girl's net and creel of fish, and rejoined her.

As they started down the landwash together, her hand touched his arm, a little gesture of gratitude. "You and your partner—to do this for a complete stranger like me—I can't think of anything adequate to say."

Curt had not heard her speak before. Her voice drew his attention. Her English was precise and flowing, but English was not her native tongue.

"No bother to us," he turned her thanks aside. "But you do want to be more careful than you were tonight." He had meant to give her a stern "talking-to"; coming across to the island. But some instinctive reason checked him.

Paul had found the 'breed's craft and brought it to the water edge. "Use this one to go back in, Mam'selle," he bade Sonya. "Our own is muddy from a wet portage today. I'll take it."

He stepped in and glided out into the channel. Curt floated the 'breed's canoe, helped his companion in, shoved away, and followed in Paul's wake.

The girl took off her tam, wiped her forehead with a kerchief, and looked back at the receding islands. For the first time Curt observed her closely. He tried not to stare but he could hardly help it. He did not remember that he had ever seen so beautiful a girl as this tenderfoot stranger. She was odd and puzzling. Something about her—he could not pin it down to any one thing—gave him the impression of aristocracy. Brownish-golden and silky, her hair was so long that he knew it must reach to her knees when she combed it out loose. She was about twenty-four, he judged; maybe twenty-five—it was hard to tell a girl's age, especially at twilight in a canoe.

In a vague way he understood why he had not given her that "talking-to." She was no child, like Rosalie Marlin, to be scolded or lectured. Her thoughtful features showed a maturity far beyond her

years, a maturity of mind and heart which Rosalie did not have and never would attain.

"My brother said he met you this afternoon when you landed," she broke their silence. "My name is Sonya Nichols."

Curt was surprised. Ralph Nichols' sister! He hadn't connected those two at all. Sonya—wasn't that foreign? It might be French or Russian or German or anything, but hardly Canadian. Her voice, name and whole air were distinctly alien.

He recollected himself. "Mine's Ralston, Curt Ralston. A prospector."

She eyed him narrowly. As he felt her gaze upon him Curt knew she was forming her private opinion of him as a man.

"I wouldn't have taken you for a prospector, Mr. Ralston."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, just because."

"I suppose I'm not the sourdough type, with trousers stuffed into my boots and a laurel thicket on my face," he explained with a casual laugh. "I'm a book-learned geologist of sorts. Does a fellow have to fry pancakes in his shovel and chew tobacco in his sleep before you consider him an eighteen-carat bush-loper?"

SONYA smiled. "Oh, not at all. What I meant was that—well. I just wouldn't have put you down as a prospector."

She seemed to imply that she had considered him above that carefree bush-loping type and that he had dropped in her estimation when she found he was a mere wilderness roamer.

As he drove the canoe along he wondered just who and what she was. Ralph Nichols' sister, yes; no doubt accompanying her brother on a field trip; but those were mere surface facts, not explaining the girl herself.

"Are you intending to be here at Russian Lake very long, Miss Nichols?"

"We're leaving tomorrow morning."

Curt felt disappointed to hear she was going away so soon. Aside from her being a girl, she was a person worth getting better acquainted with.

They drew near the shore. Curt pointed at the dim outlines of the *ostrog* and tried to make talk.

"I suppose you've heard the wild yarns about that place, Miss Nichols?"

"Those 'yarns' aren't half as wild as the



real facts. Father Lespérance was telling me yesterday about the actual history of this old fort. You see, he discovered the *ostrog* records. They were hidden in a niche above the main door, and a stone tumbled during a thunderstorm, and that's how he happened to find them."

While they drifted on in she sketched him a few high lights from the *ostrog's* story. A hundred and forty years ago a tribe of Indians, the Kloshees, had lived around the shores of Russian Lake. The Cossacks came inland, subjugated them by trickery, forced them to bring stone and make the buildings; and then began robbing, extorting, torturing. In a single generation the Kloshees dropped from a tribe of four hundred people to a mere remnant of eighty. But then an avalanche fell upon the fort one night, an avalanche of vengeance which had been damming up for twenty years. Attacking the *ostrog* while the Cossacks were drinking heavily, the eighty surviving Kloshees killed them all, burned their bodies in one huge pyre; and their old shaman laid the dread Thunder Curse on the place. Only the priest was left alive.

"It was a summer night like tonight," Sonya added. "Eight *promyshleniki*, who escaped the first rush, barricaded themselves in one of the *ostrog* rooms, but the Kloshees chopped the door off its hinges and killed them. I imagined I could still see the dark stains on the walls of that room."

Curt thought that the Indians he had seen on the landing that afternoon were a pretty mild set to be descendants of the fiery tribe who had battled the Cossacks to a standstill, returning massacre for extortion. "They've certainly come down a notch," he remarked. "They're as peaceful as coast Siwash now."

"Oh, you're mistaken; the Indians around here aren't Kloshees," she corrected him. "They're descendants of another band that used to live down toward Tellacet. The Kloshees fled back into the mountains after that massacre, and they've stayed there ever since. They live up north in the Lilluar headwaters, and keep themselves isolated from other tribes, and they won't let white people come into their territory at all."

Curt recalled a time when he had sat on the pier at Fort McMurray with Inspector Jamieson of the Indian Bureau,

and Jamieson had told him about a "lost" tribe in the Lilluar Mountains. These Kloshees might be the tribe Jamieson meant. The two descriptions fitted. According to Jamieson's account they were a wild and unapproachable clan. He had so far persuaded the Indian Bureau to let them alone because they minded their own business and clutched their freedom so pathetically.

Gliding ashore, he beached the 'breed's canoe and started up the path with his companion. The *ostrog* loomed up just ahead. At the door he flipped the light on the massive rock walls and the broad parapet twenty-five feet high where *promyshleniki* once paced sentry-go at night. They stepped into the gloomy hallway that led down the center.

The roof had partly fallen in; the floor had rotted, leaving only the thick beams; the dust of many generations covered everything; but otherwise the ruin lay there as it had been left on the night of the massacre, one hundred and twenty years ago.

Down the dusty hallway led a fresh moccasin track, small and dainty. Curt knew it was Sonya's, on some previous expedition. She certainly had nerve, to visit that place alone!

At the far end of the corridor she pointed to the doorway of the room at their extreme left. The sturdily-built door itself had been battered off its hinges and was gone; but the wood casing still remained. The timber was hacked and splintered by a rain of ax blows, and the very stones at the edge of it were chipped.

In the hushed silence Sonya lowered her voice to a whisper. "The massacre room, Mr. Ralston. Those last eight Cossacks barricaded themselves here. These blows were from the copper axes of the Kloshees as they broke down the door."

Inside the room Curt played the flash about. A dozen rusty muskets of the flint-lock type lay scattered on the floor. Against an empty powder canister lay a broken sword with richly chased hilt. He rubbed away the corrosion till he made out the loping wolf insignia of the old Cossacks, surrounded by the imperial crest of the Romanoffs. Not caring for so gruesome a souvenir, he put it down.

In the prison house behind the *ostrog* they saw iron staples in the rock walls where wretched natives had once been

chained. A whipping post stood in the center. To their right was a small room, windowless and half underground. They stepped over, looked inside. A wooden rack, a rusty wire whip and other broken "appliances" were tumbled in the dust. In one corner they saw the ashes and blackened rocks of a small forge; and in another lay a skeleton, small, as of an Indian child. Curt felt Sonya's hand trembling on his arm. A kind of horror swept through him too as he realized that they stood in the torture room of the Cossacks. God above, what brutalities had that cavelike den been witness to in times past! No wonder that a blast of lightning had struck the prison house!

HE took Sonya out of the ghastly place into the clean sweet night air, and they went on toward the post.

"It was plain justice that the Klosohees did wipe out those Cossacks," he remarked grimly. "The Czaristic régime allowed torture like this to go on for two thousand miles up and down the Pacific Coast. They were just as brutal to their own subjects. That place back there is only a sample of Siberia and the prison islands. Thank heaven, that régime got what was coming to it, too! The Leninists did a good job when they wiped that depravity out, root, stock and branch. They deserve thanks—"

Sonya stopped suddenly, and her hand dropped from Curt's arm. "Thanks?" She whirled on him, her eyes flashing. "To that crew of murderers?" Her words came in a torrent, angry ringing words. "You don't realize what you're saying. You don't know anything about the red wave of bloodshed that swept all over Russia in '17 and '18. You didn't see hundreds and thousands of innocent people killed, to atone for what a guilty few had done. Thanks—to those killers? Don't you ever say a thing like that to me!"

Curt stepped back as though she had struck him. Her anger was like a blow, so sudden and violent and utterly unexpected. For a moment he hardly knew what to say. Then he became a little angry himself. What he had just said didn't call for any such tirade from her.

"If you please," he said, "I limited my statement to the Czaristic outfit. I don't condone this 'red wave of bloodshed' that you speak about. I said it was a good thing

that the Leninists swept the Romanoff régime off the map. I'm sorry if my opinion wounded you, but—it's my opinion."

"You're welcome to it!"

"Let's not have any angry feelings about it, please."

"I'm not angry."

"Well, if you're not, I wouldn't want to be close by when you *are*!"

Sonya struggled to control herself. "Let's drop it."

"All right."

In an awkward silence they walked on out the path. Curt wondered, in a bewildered way, what on earth his remark had touched off in her, to make her fly all to pieces like that. He had recovered from his own anger, but her fiery words were ringing in his ears yet.

Near the tent she stopped, faced him. "You needn't go on to the post with me; it's only a few steps." She gave him her hand. "I'm really grateful to you and your partner for coming over to that island. I won't ever forget it."

He was still staring after her when Paul came out of the tent.

"I say, Paul," he remarked dryly, "it's a good thing you and I went over to that island and stopped that."

"Why so?"

"Well, if we hadn't, I'm thinking there'd be a dead half-breed over there by now!"

## CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE after dark, when Curt and Paul were sitting on a chopping block talking over their plans for that night, old John Paxton came walking into the glow of their campfire.

"Have a seat, John," Curt invited, standing up and offering his own place on the block. He wanted a talk with Paxton, for the guileless old fellow was a mine of information. He was familiar with everybody at Russian Lake, knew every river and range between there and the Yukon. The Klosohees kept all other whites out of the Lilluars, but kindly old John ran his fur path unmolested.

"Don't git up fer me," he bade Curt. "I jist stepped over to say they's goin' to be a leetle potlatch at my camp in about twenty minits. Ralph an' Sonya an' Father Lesperance an' others'll be there, an' I figgered you b'ys might like to j'in us, bein' sorta strangers here."

Curt accepted eagerly. That campfire, where he would meet people and learn things, was an opportunity made to order. And he would get to see Sonya Nichols again, a last time probably, since she was leaving the next day.

Old John went back to his camp. While Paul busied himself making a spruce-tip mattress for their sleeping pokes, Curt leaned against the cache sapling and looked out upon the dark lake, not thinking about his hunt for Igor Karakhan but about Sonya Nichols' flashing eyes and the imperious toss of her head as she read him the riot act.

"Our marooned friend over on the island stands to get a soaking tonight," Paul broke into his thoughts, as a distant mutter of thunder rolled out of the western mountains. "He deserves worse, that ape. You should have let me shoot him."

Curt straightened up. He had forgotten all about the 'breed. "I suppose you're right, Paul. But still, he was so drunk he wasn't altogether responsible. I didn't think about this storm coming on. I ought to go on and bring him back."

"A soaking will do him good. Cold water gets one over a *boisson* quickly."

"But he's got no fire or shelter. He'll be blue-cold by morning."

"As you think," Paul gave in. "Shall I go along?"

"It's not necessary; he's cooled off by now. You finish with that mattress."

Slipping his flash and automatic into his pocket, he stepped down to the landwash, launched the canoe and headed across for the islands.

He found the right channel without difficulty and nosed down through it to the island of dead pines. At his hail the 'breed came out to the beach. Curt explained, told him to get in, and shoved off.

On the way back he suggested, "What d'you say, friend—let's bury what happened this evening."

The 'breed seemed to have been waiting for him to say something, for he blazed out: "W'at damn beezness did you got come butt in? Dat not your woomans."

"Well, no, but she wasn't yours either, friend," Curt pointed out. He added patiently: "Now let me show you something. Suppose my partner and I hadn't come over there. The girl would have reported you to the Yellow-stripes. Soon or late they'd have got you. This country isn't

big enough to hold you or anybody else that they really go after. If you look at this right, we saved you from—well, the penalty for what you tried is—hanging."

The ugly word made the 'breed jerk. In the dark Curt could feel the man glaring at him with an animalish hatred. He kept an eye on the fellow and loosened the automatic in his pocket. From experience with 'breeds of that sort, he knew he had made a vicious enemy. If a safe chance ever came along, this chap was going to slide a knife between his ribs or put a bullet into his back.

"Damn fools w'at come nose into not-deir-beezness," the *métis* growled, "dey sometam mebbe git cached onder a pile of rocks back in de woods somew'ere."

Curt's patience snapped. He stopped paddling, tapped on the gunwale.

"See here, you, if you try any rifle talk with my partner or me, you'd better make your first shot good! Hug your grudge if you want to, but if I catch you as much as looking cross-eyed at that girl again, you'll be the one to get cached under a pile of rocks, and I don't mean *peutêtre!*"

They skirled on ashore. With a low sinister oath by way of good-bye the 'breed stalked off into the dark.

Curt went up to the tent, where Paul was tuning his guitar. Taking a can of cigarettes and a box of chocolate squares as their contribution, they stepped out the path to old John's "git-together."

The company had already gathered. At the fireglow edge a number of Indians squatted on their heels. Several of the *métis* men who lived at the fort looked to Curt like Russian half-bloods. Corporal Hodkins had gone to bed, but Mrs. Hodkins, a pleasant matronly woman of thirty-five, had come down and was sitting beside Sonya on a packing box. A rawboned young trapper had brought along with him two fuzzy little wolf cubs which he had found, and was having a great game with the tiny waifs over a strip of caribou jerky. The city sportsman, standing up so as to attract everybody's attention to himself, was telling some yarn about a hand-to-hand fight he had had with an Alaskan brown bear.

Curt pulled a log close to the packing box for himself and Paul, and sat down, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible so that he could watch and listen. Somebody in that company might be Igor Kara-



khan's contact man. A word, a glance, a stray little slip might give him a clue.

THE ash-log fire felt comfortable against the chill of night. On a slanted balsam slab Paxton was roasting a thirty-pound lake trout which he had caught.

He glanced now and then at Sonya, who sat near him, with the firelight shining in her clear eyes and the glow of it tangled in her hair. She had looked up and nodded when he and Paul came, but she did not speak, and he believed that she had cast him into the outer darkness because of his good word for the Leninists.

The question of her nationality still troubled him, and he determined to settle it once and for all. Reaching for Paul's guitar, he plucked a chord or two, and then started a Volga folksong. The wavy throbbing rhythm made everybody stop talking and listen. Watching Sonya, Curt saw that the old melody had caught her too. He met her eye, smiled at her, nodded; and she began humming softly:

*Rahza-viem mih beretzu*

*Rahza-viem mih da kudriavul . . .*

As he listened to the strange words which came so naturally from her lips, Curt's last doubts went glimmering. Russian, she was! That song had got into her blood. Her accent and her interest in those ruins had made him suspect her nationality. Now he *knew*.

She must be a Russian *émigré*, he reasoned; exiled by the Revolution and therefore bitter against it. Her manners indicated that she had come from a well-to-do family, possibly from the aristocracy. But what about her brother? Ralph didn't appear Russian, or an alien at all. His name was English and he seemed to be an ordinary Canadian citizen. He was a nice fellow, quiet, likable; and anyone could see with half an eye that he loved her very tenderly. But he was of ordinary measure while Sonya was an extraordinary person—as different from him as a wild gyrfalcon from some unassuming creature of the ground.

Altogether there was something odd about the relationship of those two, something that he could not quite fathom.

Old John took the trout from the balsam slab, divided it; and a *métisse* girl handed the portions around on strips of birchbark. As Curt passed out his ciga-

rettes and chocolate squares, he purposively stopped with Nichols, crouched down, and fell into talk with the entomologist.

"I understand you're not staying at Russian Lake much longer, Ralph."

"No. Mr. Higginbotham here has hired two guides for us and we're leaving tomorrow morning."

"Making a trip into the bush?"

"Yes, up the Lilluar."

The young trapper cut in bluntly: "Nichols, if you try to go into the Kloshees ranges, it'll be just too bad, that's all! Those Kloshees ain't any tame treaty Siwash. When I first hit this country four year ago, I thought this talk about 'em was mostly *pelton-wawa*, but I found out different! Started up the Lilluar one summer to prospect, I did; an' when I come to the pass, 'bout five days up from here, I got a warning to turn 'round an' *hyak* back. That warnin' fell in front of my canoe. I hollered across at 'em, 'Outside, you bloody Smokies, or I'll come over there an' spit tobaccor juice in your bloody eyes!'

"Well sir, I changed my tune an' changed 'er quick. The next arrer that come my way, it sizzled clear through my canoe an' missed me less'n three inches. An' that was just a sample starter. You ort to've seen them arrers come. The air was full of 'em. Boy, I flopped down in that boat an' reached over the side with my paddle, an' did I get back out of there on the prod!

"You may be a scientist, Nichols, an' after nothin' but harmless bugs, but they won't have any more use for you than for any white man. You'll git to the pass all right, but if you go any farther you'll float back down, so full of arrers you'll look like a pincushion! Ain't I right, John?"

"They don't let whites in," old John corroborated. "They'll give a man fa'r caution. I'm jist meanin' to say they shoot squar' with a person at first, an' then if he don't take warnin' they shoot *straight*."

The city sportsman winked knowingly at Sonya. "Scare talk, Miss Nichols. They've repeated it so much that they've got to believing it themselves."

"Says you!" the young trapper snorted. "You've been around reservation Siwash and sich-like, till you know too much about what you don't know nothin' about."

Sonya quietly ignored the sportsman and

spoke to the men who knew what they were talking about. "I don't deny there's a danger. But we're going to try and get on friendly terms with the Kloshees. We do want to work in that country. One week in there would be worth a year in a country that's been combed and combed."

Curt took no part in the discussion. By linking up Jamieson's account of the wild Lilluar tribe with Sonya's sketch of their history, he could see the whole story of the Kloshees pretty clearly. After that massacre of the Cossacks the original band had fled to the Lilluar headwaters, no doubt fearing retribution; and had taken up their home in those untraversed ranges. Their hostility toward white people undoubtedly sprang from the brutal treatment they had received from the *promyshlenniki*.

Now Sonya and Ralph were going into that pot of trouble, with no protection except a pair of *métis* guides who would desert at the first real danger. For a city girl and man to venture into that territory was sheer suicide, and not a very pleasant kind of suicide at that.

AT eleven-thirty the first spatter of rain broke up the party. Curt wanted to ask Sonya if he might walk up to Higginbotham's residence with her, where she and Ralph were staying. Sonya said good-night to Mrs. Hodkins and turned to him.

"I've been wanting to apologize to you, Mr. Ralston." She was really sincere about it. "Just after I left you I realized how terribly I'd acted, and I almost went back to your tent to tell you I was sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"You know perfectly well what. You and Paul came over to that island, and you risked getting killed, for me, a total stranger; and then, not twenty minutes later, I—I almost called you names!"

"Why, it was as much my fault as yours," he insisted, as they started up toward the factor's house. "I threw out a big wild statement and you caught me up on it. But honestly"—he was thinking of her javelin-sharp words—"I'd hate to ever get into a real quarrel with you."

"Am I that bad?"

"Oh, you're positively formidable! To change the subject, there's something I'd like to say, if you won't bite my head off."

"I promise. What is it?"

"Well, if you don't mind an unsolicited opinion, I believe you and your brother ought to think twice before you start north in Kloshe territory."

"But we've thought twice already, Mr. Ralston, and we've decided it's worth the risk."

She said it so conclusively that Curt dropped the subject.

At the door of the residence they chatted a few moments about the party, and then Sonya bade him good night. Curt turned away reluctantly, looking back once for a glimpse of her as she stood outlined in the shaft of light from the door. He knew that he would travel down many a year before meeting another girl so unforgettable, and that when her trail separated from his in the morning he would carry with him a sense of something lost.

He told himself that when the Karakhan hunt was over he was going to look her up, find out who she really was, and try for a better acquaintance. He would be a poor detective if he could not trace Ralph and her.

The rain came on in earnest shortly after he reached camp. High wind lashed the pines, woke up the lake and tugged at their tent; rain fell in gusty sheets; flash after blinding flash of lightning banged into the timber and rolled bellowing across the lake.

Sitting on their sleeping pokes, he and Paul waited for the time when they could begin their work. Curt felt a trickle of water on his hat brim. He reached for his torch and looked up. About two feet down from the ridgeline a hole the size of a pencil had appeared in the canvas. On the opposite wall and at the same height was another hole.

"Look, Paul—how'd those get there? No stick would blow clear through both—"

A livid white flash lit up the tent as plain as day. An instant later—*kip-plang!*—their nested set of aluminum dishes, lying on a box near the flap-front, suddenly exploded in a dozen directions, as though possessed of some diabolic magic. One struck Curt on the arm, two went flying out the flap, another tore through Paul's mosquito canopy.

In the rolling thunder Curt heard the half-muffled bark of a rifle.

He sprang to his feet. "Hell! Somebody's shooting at our tent! By the lightning flashes! It's that 'breed!'"

They grabbed slickers and automatics, and leaped outside. A flash of lightning blinded them as a white bolt careened into the timber just back of the Indian tepees. Throwing themselves down behind the firewood, they waited for the next spurt of rifle fire to stab the darkness.

"Watch back in the timber, Paul. I'll watch down toward the *ostrog*. He's in one of those directions. He's not out on the lake or around the post anywhere."

A minute lengthened to three, five. The rain seemed to fall upon them in bucketfuls. It ran down their necks and up their sleeves, soaking them in spite of their slickers.

They lay there for ten minutes, praying for just one glimpse of a rifle flash. But the 'breed did not shoot again.

"We might as well go back in," Curt suggested finally. "That lightning bolt when we first jumped outside—he saw us then and broke off his little game." He wiped the water from his eyes. "I ought to've taken your advice and left him over on the island. We saved him from a soaking and then got it ourselves."

They went into the tent, collected their battered tins and sat down to wait. They were not molested again. Paul pointed with his cigarette at the sinister holes through the tent walls.

"Sometime we're going to have a showdown with that slinker. He's going to kill us or we're going to kill him."

THE rain finally settled to a steady downpour. Curt held his watch to the red glow of his pipe.

"Twelve-thirty, Paul. We'd better start; our job'll take us an hour or more. This rain is our good luck—everybody'll be indoors."

They stepped outside. The rain still beat down, but the thunderheads with their livid flashes had passed on east, so that there was no danger of the lightning betraying them. The cabins and Indian tepees were all dark.

They went out the path to the Bay establishment. The store, twenty steps from Higginbotham's residence, was entirely dark.

Curt whispered, "Everything looks all right. I don't think we'll be bothered. I'll go into the trading store myself. You stay here and keep guard. If anyone shows up, give that cluck of the hawk-owl in

time for me to get out. The doors are locked, but I loosened the inside catch on this front window when I was here this evening. Give me a boost up, partner."

Paul stooped. Curt stood on his shoulder, raised the window noiselessly, wedged through, and dropped down inside the store.

He was not sure his work would get results, but the odds favored it. The clue he was after almost had to be in that trading post, for there was no station between Russian Lake and the Yukon, and none nearer than Fort Nelson on the Liard.

Through the pitch dark he felt along the counter to the rear and found the desk where Higginbotham kept his books. He had scouted out the store thoroughly that evening and knew the exact ledger that he wanted. He drew it out and took it over behind the counter. Making himself a little barricade of boxes so that his flash glow could not be noticed outside, he began examining the book.

The record started with June first of the previous summer, and ran for exactly one year. Every transaction of the store, whether cash, trade or debt, had been entered by the methodical factor. Several of the months were scanty, others heavy.

By interpreting the little human stories behind the entries, Curt could reconstruct almost every happening at Russian Lake in the last twelve months.

At a first sweeping examination Curt selected four names as meriting suspicion. On the next time through, three of them dropped out. Only one remained—the name of 'Teeste LeNoir.

'Teeste—Baptiste, a *métis* name—the fellow was a half-breed. He was a trapper and he lived some distance from Russian Lake, for he did not get in often; from six to eight weeks elapsed between his visits. But when he did come in, he traded very freely. He was by easy odds the best customer that Higginbotham had.

Very plainly the fellow was buying for somebody in addition to himself. His food items were double and triple the needs of one man, and he bought cartridges for two rifles, a Savage .303 and a standard Mannlicher-Schoenauer. A bush-loper would hardly keep two heavy-duty guns of different calibers, for the cartridges wouldn't interchange. Was he buying for some other trapper or crony of his? The items proved he was not. Cigarettes in cans of



five hundred each, candy in ten-pound lots, a radio, a score of unnecessaries that cost heavily—no trapper would ever purchase those things. This unknown whom LeNoir was buying for had the luxury tastes of a city man and money to indulge them.

With his suspicion definitely focused, Curt turned again to the beginning of the record and started down across the LeNoir transactions, scrutinizing each item. In August the fellow had been hanging around Russian Lake, making little daily purchases like the other 'breeds idling there. His entries then were "charge." But in late September the whole situation suddenly changed, for he not only began buying heavily and paying cash, but he settled up a two-years' account in full. Where had he got the money for that? No guide was ever paid such wages. Late September—that was about the time when Igor Karakhan had come north into the Lilluars!

Taking nothing for granted, Curt read on and on, studying the LeNoir items, reading the story behind them. . . .

Half an hour before daybreak he straightened up from his long cramped study of the ledger and replaced the book where he had got it. Smoothing out all signs of his midnight visit, he joined Paul outside.

"Paul! We've done it!"

"What? No!"

"Can't be a doubt in the world! I found out who his contact man is. That trade record was a dead giveaway."

Oblivious of the beating rain, they shook hands over their great luck.

## CHAPTER V

**B**ACK at camp, Paul smoked a cigarette and then turned in. Curt could not sleep; too much had happened in the last few hours. Lighting a pipe, he started back to old John's tent, wanting to find out something about 'Teeste LeNoir so that he could strike up a friendship with the 'breed.

It seemed too good to be true that he had actually spotted Karakhan's lookout. Mam'selle Luck was certainly befriending him on his hunt. If only she didn't suddenly jilt him!

At the flap-front he asked, "Hello, John; still up?"

"Come in, b'y. I'm down but I ain't to sleep."

Curt went in. Old John was stretched out on his eider poke, reading a fur-company almanac by light of a candle.

"Won't keep you awake, will I, John?"

"Not a speck. I do most of my sleepin' in the winter time, like an ole b'ar."

Curt sat down on a box. "John, you know the Kloshees better than anybody else; what do you really think about this trip the Nichols are planning up the Lilluar?"

"Son, I don't *think* about that proppersition; I *know*. Sonya an' Ralph air goin' to git inter a peck of hot water. If they 'tempt to go above the pass, they're like to never git back to Roosian Lake a-tall." He groped in a pack and pulled out a curious bow. "Know what this is, b'y?"

Curt examined the strange weapon. It was made of two matched horns, with the butt ends fitted together, wrapped with sinew and cemented so cleverly that they looked like one piece.

"It's a ram-horn bow, John. I saw a couple of them once at Fort Nelson."

Old John nodded. "It's the stand-by weepoon of the Kloshees. It's jist ord'nary acc'rate but the most powerful bow you ever seen. Jist flex 'er once. Takes a good arm, don't it? That bow'll plunk an arer clean through a moose at fifty yard. Some respects it's better'n a rifle, 'specially in timber. It's silent, never gits out of kilter; an' if you run out'n 'munition fer it, you don't have to foot-slog two hundred mile fer more; you make more at the nearest service-berry bush."

The Kloshees, he went on, were hunters, living entirely by the chase. They had split into two bands, a northern one, under the leadership of Siam-Klale or the Black Grizzly, and a southern band that lived around the forks of the Lilluar.

There used to be about two hundred of them, he said, but five years ago a wandering trapper from Fort Nelson had brought influenza in and it had riddled both bands, and now they numbered only a hundred. They had found the man wandering along a river, starved and desperately ill; had taken him in, cared for him till he recovered, and the sickness had spread like a blight among them. They had set fire to a whole mountain range to drive the white disease-devils out of their territory.

They must be a pretty decent outfit, Curt thought, to take in a sick person as

they had done. They certainly had the best of reasons to hate the sight of a white man. The horrors of that prison house still lived in their tribal memory, and within the last few years one single experience with a white man had brought death to half of them.

As he handed back the weapon of those mountain nomads, he made up his mind that he was going to do something about Ralph and Sonya's trip. They didn't know how to take care of themselves in the wilderness, and they knew nothing at all about handling Indians. They had to be shielded somehow, and the job was up to him.

"Sonya mentioned to me 'bout you havin' that run-in with the 'breed last evenin'," old John remarked. "I know you c'n take care of yourself, but jist the same you be leery of that feller while you're here at Roosian Lake."

"Why so?"

"He's a bad 'un, 'Teeste is."

Curt started a little. "'Teeste—who?"

"His name's 'Teeste LeNoir."

Out of long experience with crashing surprises, Curt never batted an eye. But inwardly he was dumfounded. Heavens above, he'd whipped Karakhan's contact man! Had made a bitter enemy of the one person at Russian Lake with whom he wanted to be friends!

"Yes, he's a bad 'un," Paxton repeated. "He ain't above stickin' a knife inter a man, 'specially when he's got some of this *houtchini* in 'm."

Curt seized his chance to get a line on LeNoir. "Who is he, John? Just a general loafer?"

"No, he's a trapper. Guides some, too, when any big-game hunter happens to git in this fer. He come from the God's Lake country in Manitoby 'bout eight year ago. I heerd rumor that he done somethin' over there—slipped a man some pizen, I heerd—and had to put his foot in front of his nose an' *git*."

Curt wondered how Igor Karakhan, the metropolitan criminal, had ever got in touch with this fugitive of the Strong-Woods. Whatever the explanation, the fact remained that LeNoir was the man's contact with the world outside. The 'breed could be watched, shadowed; and through him they could nail Karakhan.

"Where does LeNoir trap, John? Around here close, I suppose."

"No, 'way up the Lilluar. Up nigh the forks."

"In Klososhee territory? How does it happen they allow him in there?"

"They ain't so touchy ag'inst 'breeds as ag'inst whites. 'Sides, he's got some stand-in with Siam-Klale, the sub-chief. I never heerd jist what."

Curt grimaced. More bad news. Karakhan must be living up north in those forbidden mountains, tolerated there because of the 'breed's influence over the Klososhees. To get the Cossack, Paul and he would have to go into Klososhee territory and run the gantlet of those ram-horn bows. Not so good. After plain sailing through the early stages, his hunt had suddenly stiffened on him. Like most of her gender, Mam'selle Luck had started to play fickle.

"Did you ever do any prospecting up the Lilluar, John?" Curt asked.

"Not to speak of. I found a leetle float in some side cricks, but nothin' to pitch your hat about. You ain't figurin' on prospectin' up thataway?"

"Well, up as far as the pass. You say there's no danger that far. Could you make me a map of the territory? There aren't any government charts."

"I might mebbe. I ain't no hand at pencil work, but I know the country from A to Z."

Paxton went to work with a paper sack and pencil stub and produced a chart. It was a rough thing but accurate and dependable.

"Here's the pass," he explained to Curt. "Here's the Lilluar Forks on above. This mountain lake here, that's where I trap."

"Where does LeNoir live?"

"On this main fork, 'bout a mile up from the prong."

Curt folded the paper and buttoned it carefully in his shirt pocket. Good work, for half an hour's talk! That one little dot, showing him LeNoir's cabin, would save weeks of searching. He would make copies of that chart; one for himself and Paul; one for Smash, who was standing by at Tellacet with the Fairchild; and one to send to A-K, to let Marlin know what had happened to them if they never came out of the Lilluars.

TWO mornings later, at her camp forty miles up river, Sonya awoke at day-break, parted the tent-flap and looked out.

Ralph and the two *métis* guides were still rolled up in their sleeping bags. Through the gray smoke mist rising from the cold waters of the Lilluar, pairs of nesting teal and ducks zipped overhead, their swift wings whistling long after the birds were swallowed up in the mist.

Stepping down to the water edge, she propped her mirror against a stone, bathed her face and hands, and braided her hair. Back at the campfire, she raked some coals out of the ashes, got a fire going, and cooked breakfast. Ralph and the guides still showed no signs of waking, so she took a small bucket and started up a mountain torrent to a thicket of red raspberries.

Not long after she reached the patch, she happened to glance back at camp and was startled to see a canoe nosing out of the river fog, a canoe with two men in it. They glided ashore, beached the craft and walked up to her fire, with their rifles in the crook of their arms. And then she recognized them as Curt Ralston and his young partner!

They were a welcome surprise. For several reasons she was never gladder to see people than those two. But what were they doing up the Lilluar? They hadn't mentioned that they intended to come north from Russian Lake.

Through a screen of boughs she watched them a minute. They did not wake Ralph or the guides. Curt pointed at her breakfast keeping warm in the ashes and looked around for her, evidently knowing she was up.

She stepped out to the timber edge. Curt saw her then and came up along the torrent.

"You're awake early," he greeted with his likable smile.

"I couldn't sleep with a morning like this just outside the tent," she answered. "You'll stay and have breakfast with us, won't you?"

"If you'll let me give you a hand with that berry-picking."

"I won't let you pay for hospitality. At Russian Lake you and Paul earned all the hospitality I can ever show you."

"Well then, just for company's sake."

"All right."

He took up her bucket, and they went back along the torrent to the patch.

"I didn't know Paul and you were intending to come up this way," she remarked, bending down a tall briar.

He answered her unspoken question. "We're prospecting up the Lilluar."

Sonya did not know whether to believe him or not. Ever since meeting him she had been trying to figure him out. He certainly didn't appear to be a prospector. He was miles above the type. For a person of his caliber to waste his years poking around in creek beds was odd, to say the least. She wondered whether this trip of his was merely a prospecting trip or whether he might not be in there on some business which he was keeping to himself. She hated to think that he was just a drifter. That was all right for the men at Russian Lake, but he had better stuff to him.

"Paul and I are going up as far as the pass," he volunteered presently. And then came out with the purpose of his visit. "If there's no objection, our parties could sort of be neighbors. In this country, people usually throw in together that way."

His offer, as fine as it was unexpected, nearly took Sonya's breath. She wanted to snap it up instantly before he could change his mind. Two days of river travel had showed her how little she and Ralph knew about the Strong-Woods and how worthless those lazy guides were. Secretly she feared the trip ahead. It bristled with all sorts of dangers and uncertainties. Ralph could not meet them; François and Jocku would not; but Curt and Paul could and would.

"If the idea doesn't appeal to you," he said, "please don't be hesitant about saying so. You mustn't let us break into any of your plans."

"Oh, but it does appeal to me!"

"You'd like it, then?"

Sonya hesitated. In Curt's tones and his manner she could see that he was interested in her. On a lengthy wilderness trip together where they would be thrown into constant intimate association, he might come to like her a very great deal. It wouldn't be right to allow that. Entirely free from any vanity about a man falling in love with her, she felt that it would be unworthy and cruel to cause him any pain, especially when he was being so generous to her and Ralph.

"But you'll be traveling so much faster than we," she objected.

"Oh, no, we'll be taking it leisurely, scouting for float as we go. To be frank, I don't believe you and Ralph are used to



water-dogging on a mountain river. Till you get onto the hang of things, it mightn't be a bad idea to have a couple of experienced people along. Also, if those guides don't prove dependable, you wouldn't be left in the lurch."

"Your offer is magnanimous, Curt." She stumbled just a little over his first name. "But we'd be a handicap. We'd be a positive nuisance."

"Your company and Ralph's would be a real pleasure to us both. Talk it over with him, won't you?"

"I know he'll jump at the chance."

"Then why won't you, too?"

Still wavering, Sonya looked down into the torrent where a number of tiny trout were darting about in a pool like flashes of sunshine. She knew that the safe and unselfish thing was to refuse. But then she thought that if she steered their association carefully she could guide it into a comradely friendship and keep it from becoming dangerous. If it did get dangerous, she could tell him candidly that he must not think of her as anything more than friend. And she did need his help so badly. With her it might make all the difference between success and abject failure.

"We might—we could *try* it," she assented finally. "At least we can start out together, and if it doesn't work, we can always split up."

As they went on filling the pail, Curt congratulated himself on having neatly solved a tough problem. He would be going up the Lilluar on his own business, and at the same time Paul and he could look after Sonya's safety. And he would have her company for a week, a week of wilderness travel with her. At the pass, when she and Ralph came face to face with the Kloshee danger and realized how serious it was, they would undoubtedly turn back to Russian Lake. That would free him and Paul, to go on inside and nail Karakhan.

## CHAPTER VI

THE report which Karakhan had just listened to made him uneasy. His fingers, long and sensitive as a musician's, tapped the rough table thoughtfully. Looking past LeNoir, he stared out the cabin window at the lake, pondering the 'breed's story.

The account might be a lie. LeNoir

might just be trumping up a nonexistent danger in order to jack his pay higher. But then, the story *might* be fact.

With fifty hard canoe-miles behind him since dawn, LeNoir leaned back against the log wall, watching his chief sharply. This man of the steel-cold eyes and calm voice—one could never so much as guess at his thoughts. One only knew that he was greatly wanted by the Yellow-stripes, that he had buried himself in these mountains to shake off the police, and that he was planning flight away at the end of the summer to some new land.

About his getting drunk, his fight with Curt and his shooting up their tent, LeNoir had wisely said nothing. He knew his chief too well. Karakhan would not hesitate to pump a bullet into any person who endangered him by going on *boissons*.

In his way LeNoir was altogether loyal to Karakhan, who had been very generous to him in the matter of money. The 'breed had a code, such as it was. He had bargained to protect the Cossack, and he was giving everything he had to that job, for he was as hard-set in his loyalties as in his feuds.

It was twilight in the mountains. Out of the mantling darkness of the lake danced a long shadowy mottle that swiftly shaped itself to the half-mysterious lines of an Indian birchbark canoe. It was a Kloshee hunter returning to camp; one of the four men who stayed there always as a bodyguard to Karakhan. Only a 'poorwill, whistling its repetitious mating call near the Kloshee lean-to's, and a family of young muskrats splashing about the crude hangar which housed the Speedair, broke the deep mystic hush.

His refuge, at the headwaters of the Lilluar, had been all that Karakhan had hoped for, and more. The big cabin, his home for nine months, was comfortable with handmade furniture, bear rugs on the floor, a spacious fireplace, and even a small radio. At his door lay a jade-green lake, ice-fed, teeming with steelhead and grayling. Just west of the lake two great mountains, Sunali and Dinaggwah, had given him unimaginable shooting—moose and caribou, bighorn and goat and the surly trundling grizzly. The vigorous life outdoors had braced him, hardened him. The old weariness had vanished. In its stead a new energy flowed in his veins.

Yet he had grown tired of it all. Tired

of his isolation from men and women. Tired of the superstitious Indians who harbored him and who had fallen under his sway. The city was a drug in his veins and he could not live for long without it.

A few months more of this, till he was sure that the hunt had been completely abandoned, and then his flight out, a port in the Orient, freedom—and the wide world before him!

So far nothing had threatened his security. In the heart of the Klosohee ranges he had found the hiding place of places. Besides being isolated by the wilderness of the country, he was guarded by a whole band of natives and barricaded behind a fanatic hostility a hundred and forty years old!

But LeNoir's report was a ripple of wind across the placid water. Was the 'breed lying?

He lit a goose-tallow candle and set it where it shone on LeNoir's face but left his own in shadow. From practice on far keener enemies, he could read the thoughts of the half-breed as easily as one could watch a school of clumsy mullets play around in a crystal pool. He knew that in most ways LeNoir was altogether loyal, but the loyalty only aroused his sardonic contempt. LeNoir would be useful to him a little while longer; but after that the fellow would be a danger and had to be got rid of. It was possible that just before the flight out, when there was no prospect of more money, the 'breed would betray him to the Mounted in order to collect a reward. Even discounting that risk, it was never wise to leave anyone behind who knew too much. He would need one more batch of supplies, in August. He would let the *métis* make that trip. And then he would quietly slip him a dose of the strychnine with which LeNoir poisoned wolves on his fur path.

"Just what sort of people are this Curt Ralston and these two Nichols?" he asked, trying to trip LeNoir up.

LeNoir told him again, repeating the whole story.

Karakhan's doubt about the report vanished. The 'breed's details came too readily to be manufactured, and they squared exactly with his first account.

Tapping a fresh cigarette, Karakhan reached the candle for a light. He had never known a Senya or Ralph Nichols; but the description of the girl—golden-

brown hair, brown eyes, a faint accent—flashed a picture of Sonya Volkov before him. His blood ran faster at the thought of her. But of course it was ridiculous to imagine that this girl might be Sonya Volkov. She had not the faintest notion where he was; and she would not come to him anyway, the *p'tite puritaine*.

"How far up the Lilluar did you say they are?" he asked LeNoir.

"Dey mus' be 'most to de pass, now."

"They might be just some party of trippers making a little jaunt into the mountains."

"*Non, non!* I talkit to dose *métis* guides an' fin' out. Dey breeng grub for mebbe two mont' treep."

"You say that this Ralston fellow is some prospector loping the bush?"

"Dat's w'at he say he is; but me, I don't b'lieve heem. He got no callous on hees han's, lak prospector got. He do t'ings lak ceety man—say 't'ank you,' keep shave, and talkit lak book-learn' feller."

Something queer about this Ralston, Karakhan sensed intuitively. A trained geologist would know that the formations of the Lilluars were not gold-bearing. Anybody who ventured into Klosohee territory after all the warnings at Russian Lake, must have important business in there. Ralston might be a *Mounted detective*. LeNoir might have dropped some incautious remark on one of his trips, and the relentless Yellow-stripes were on the trail. The Mounted was an outfit to be feared. Other forces of other nations were better trained, better paid, less crushed with work; but the Mounted scratched no cases off their docket till those cases were settled. And they were incorruptible men. There lay the secret of their strength—they could not be bought off or intimidated or turned aside in any way.

Whoever Ralston was, he had to be stopped. If an enemy, the sooner the better. If only a prospector—well, the country had plenty of such bush-lopers, and one would not be missed.

"Where's the southern band of Klosohees, LeNoir?"

"At de Lilluar forks."

"Do they know about this party coming up river?"

LeNoir shook his head.

Karakhan flipped his cigarette through the window, a decisive gesture. "Well, see

to it that they find out! Tell 'em that this Ralston is a land scout for the white men, coming in here to look things over. Tell 'em that other white men will follow after him and shoot the Kloshees down and take away these mountains. Understand?"

The 'breed grinned. He could imagine how the Kloshees would react to *that*!

"You get back down the Lilluar," Karakhan added, "and keep tab on that man yourself. Give him a warning at the pass. If he turns back, let him alone; we don't want to stir up trouble if it isn't necessary. But if he disregards the warning and comes on, simply kill him, and make the job look like a rapids accident."

LeNoir nodded, his black eyes glittering in the candlelight.

## CHAPTER VII

FIFTEEN miles below the pass, Curt's party went ashore on a headland one noon for the midday rest. Casually walking away from the others, Curt started up the landwash on a little expedition of his own. For several days a suspicion had been growing on him about Sonya and Ralph, and he meant to settle the matter before going a paddle-stroke farther.

He glanced back once at camp. The two guides were lazily building a fire. Badly fagged out, Ralph had flung himself down on a bit of moss to rest. At the upturned canoes Paul was calking leaks with gum pot and canvas while Sonya cut strips and handed him things.

For a girl, Sonya had turned out to be a surprisingly good fellow-traveler. Afraid of being a "nuisance" on the trip, she had pitched in valiantly. She insisted on doing most of the cooking, carried her own pack across portages, and did as much of the paddle work as any of them. Curt admired her for being so good a little soldier; admired her all the more because he knew by now that she had been gently raised and must find this journey a harsh contrast.

For a week the combined party had been pushing north steadily. But the Lilluar was a hard stream to water-dog on, and they had made poor time. At the dangerous rapids, and the tumultuous river had plenty of them, they were forced to tote everything across "wet" portages or over torturing stretches of down timber, where a mile in half a day was good progress.

As he walked along the landwash, Curt looked on up river at the Lilluar pass, in plain sight now. A grim reminder of danger just ahead, it brought him somber thoughts of ram-horn bows, his hunt for Karakhan, his heavy responsibility for Ralph and Sonya. He had counted positively on those two turning back at the pass, but now he doubted whether they would. They seemed determined to go on, especially Sonya.

Over the warm sand, tiger beetles and stiletto flies were hunting their insect prey. Curt passed them up with only a glance; they were too well known for his purpose. What he wanted was a peculiar beetle which he had been noticing on sand flats for several days.

Out of sight of camp he cut a pine branch and sat down on a rock. Robber flies, mud-daubers and yellow-jackets kept lighting all around him, but the beetle he wanted was rare. He waited twenty minutes before one finally came.

It lit on the sand almost between his moccasins. At the first motion of his pine branch the beetle went flitting away. Curt sprang up and took after it. Swift and agile, it led him a hot chase back and forth across the sand, but at last he got in a lucky swipe that stunned it.

As he picked his captive up and rolled it over on his palm, a twig snapped behind him. He turned. Sonya stood looking on, her eyes dancing with laughter. Curt realized she had been watching the chase, and had been amused by it. "I guess I did look ridiculous," he thought, "chasing around with half a pine tree to knock down a little bug. But anyway, I'm going to find out something now."

He mopped his forehead and stepped over to her with the beetle. His purpose seemed cruel; he felt like a guilty inquisitionist toward her.

"D'you know this beetle, Sonya?"

She examined the insect. "I wouldn't want to name it offhand." She chose her words carefully. "But it's a very interesting species."

Her description wasn't exactly scientific. Curt hated to go on with his questioning. "D'you know what family it belongs to?"

Sonya stiffened a little and glanced up at him, a sharp searching glance as though she guessed why he was quizzing her.

"I don't care to give a mere opinion,"



she parried deftly. "A person ought to make a microscopic examination before trying to classify."

Curt dropped the subject, slipped the beetle into his pocket, and started back to camp with her. He had found out what he wanted to know. Sonya had no idea what the beetle was.

At his first chance he took Ralph aside and showed him the *Cicindela*. Ralph knew no more about it than Sonya did, and furthermore he lacked her quickness of wit in getting out of a tight corner. Pinned down for an answer, he pretended to recognize the insect, and gave it a Latin name, but his bluff was a miserable one.

In a brown study Curt set the beetle free and walked over to Paul, to tell him what he had just found out. His discovery was not altogether a surprise, he had been suspecting the truth for several days; but still it staggered him considerably, now that he knew for sure. *Neither Ralph nor Sonya was an entomologist at all!* They knew absolutely nothing about the subject!

"Well Paul, my suspicion was a bull's-eye; they're not biologists." And he told Paul about the beetle.

Paul glanced toward the fire, where Sonya was getting the meal ready. "What are they doing in this country, then?"

Curt made a gesture of bafflement. "You tell me."

"Prospecting, maybe. Cheechakos take to that."

"Ralph wouldn't recognize a gold conglomerate if he stubbed his foot against one; and she's worse."

"Vacationing?"

"I can think of pleasanter ways to spend a vacation than water-dogging up this river and taking chances with these Klosohees."

"Then what's your guess?"

"I haven't got even a guess! All I know is this: whatever they're up to, it's important. They know they're running into danger, know it as well as we do. And another thing—Sonya's the real leader of those two. Ralph's just a tail to her kite."

Paul nodded. "Yes. It's not hard to see that. But what are you going to do about them?"

"Have a show-down with her and make her tell me the truth about this trip. She may have her reasons for coming in here; but she's heading into bad white water and we've got to know what's what."

When the party got ready to go on again, he suggested to Nichols:

"Ralph, you're pretty tired; maybe you'd better go with Paul this afternoon so you can take things easy. Sonya can go in my canoe. We'll work ahead and have camp made by the time you come in."

SONYA stepped into his canoe and they started out ahead of the others. By the time they reached the foot of a rapids four miles up stream, they had left the heavily laden boats out of sight around a bend. Portaging around the rapids and the overfalls above, they came out upon a long quiet stretch.

After all the hard work of the past week, the easy travel was an agreeable change. Curt paddled along leisurely, pointing out things ashore.

Just as he was thinking up a tactful way of broaching his talk with her, she surprised him with a sudden unexpected question:

"Curt, you're not really a prospector, are you?"

For a moment he thought she had pierced his mask and had found out why he really was in there.

"Why, yes," he asserted evenly. "What makes you think I'm not, Sonya?"

"I just can't imagine you as merely a prospector, Curt."

"Why?"

She studied her answer. "I'm wondering how you can be satisfied with a life like this, year in and out, Curt. It's an awfully contented and pleasurable existence. But it doesn't have any aims except, well, selfish aims. For most men it'd be all right, but not for you."

"Why do you single me out?"

"Because, Curt, *you've* got the capacity for something richer and more useful than a buried-away existence like you're leading. You don't mind my being frank?"

"Why, certainly not," he assured. But deep down, her philosophy did trouble him, arousing his old fears about the tyranny of duty.

Near five o'clock they came to a little bay, went ashore, gathered firewood and cleared a place for the two tents.

They sat down under a pine to wait for the other canoes. Curt plucked nervously at the leaf of a maiden-hair fern. He could stave off his talk with Sonya no longer.

"There's something I'd like to understand, Sonya. It's none of my business, except that I've got a friend's interest in you and Ralph—"

Sonya interrupted: "I know what you're going to say—that we're not entomologists. Ralph told me you asked *him* about that beetle. I knew you were suspicious and would find us out sometime."

She was frank about it at least, Curt thought. Most people would have attempted to keep up the bluff, but she had the good sense to realize it was useless.

She pointed at the pass. "And now you want to know why we're going into that country. You're thinking there's just some whim or rattlebrained idea behind our trip, aren't you?"

"You jump at conclusions too fast, girl. I haven't implied that either you or Ralph is rattlebrained. On the contrary, I told Paul that you must have some pretty substantial motive."

"I'm glad you have that much confidence in us, after finding out how we lied." She picked a lichen curl and unrolled it in her small brown fingers. "It is a substantial reason, Curt."

"I don't question that. But I do question your secrecy about the whole thing. If I knew what you're trying to do, I might be able to give you a hand."

Sonya shook her head. "I don't believe you would. In fact, I know you wouldn't."

"You think I'd have moral objections to it?"

She smiled enigmatically. "I'd like to tell you. But I simply can't. It's in the very nature of my motive that I must keep it to myself."

He felt provoked at her. If he had been dealing with an ordinary person, he could have made a good guess as to what lay behind this queer trip; but Sonya was so different from other girls he had known, that he simply could not fathom her.

It was possible that she or Ralph had heard some wild tale about a rich lode or placer in the Lilluars and were going in there to find it. Or that she wanted to make a study of the Kloshees themselves, one of the few tribes on the continent having a purely primitive culture. But he could not believe either of these guesses, or any of the dozen others which had occurred to him.

He refused to let the talk end in so miserable a failure. Dropping a direct ap-

proach, he tried another angle, to come help in the puzzle from a different direction. what I'm

"There's something else—still less of n then ad business, I suppose; but Sonya, why to tell n you pretend this relationship to Ralph Sonya

That caught her a surprise. A color fl I can't into her cheeks. For a moment his sudd There move threw her into confusion. fusul wa

"Pretend—relationship—what do y I su mean?" hands c

Curt was certain of his ground. H "You plunged boldly: he der

"Ralph is no more your brother tha "You're I am, girl. He's no relation to you a fumbling "I d

"Why—why, how can you make an a we ca serton like that?" Klosob

He lied: "Paul overheard you once. H "A didn't mean to listen, but he couldn't he John Paul a

"How much else did Paul hear?" H "W tones were quick, frightened. "When wa "Yo this?" "TI

"Two evenings ago. He didn't hear any She means

Sonya breathed easier. Curt realized her m too late, that he had made a mistake. Ther that was something else, and she was afraid that push he knew, he could probably have got i A swin "I

She admitted reluctantly: "Yes, you'r sohe right; we're not related. I'll tell you wh be a we made this—this arrangement. If I deal been alone, I couldn't have come in her belie at all. I wouldn't even have got as fa you as Russian Lake. Ralph's a good friend ang I do As good a friend as I ever had. I knew I dep could trust Ralph implicitly. Under the kno circumstances our arrangement was en to tirely sensible. It was the only recourse I you had."

CURT believed she was telling him the be, truth as far as Ralph was concerned. Sh Whatever her purpose on this Lilluar trip, osi she could not have come without a man hir companion.

But all that told him nothing about her ta he mission in that country. He swung the tic talk back: di

"Sonya, I'm not playing cards with you, cl he or trying to meddle in your business, or ta looking for any advantage to myself. I'm co thinking about your safety. I'm not going th to let you run blindly into danger, maybe w death. You may be justified in going on th north. In that case I'll give you all the r

help in my power. But I've got to know what I'm doing." He paused a moment, then added point-blank, "And you've got to tell me."

Ralph Sonya refused flatly. "I'm sorry, Curt. I can't do it."

There was no use to argue. Her refusal was downright and final.

"I suppose you're going to wash your hands of us now," she said.

"You intend to go on above the pass?" he demanded. And when she nodded:

"You're tackling a dangerous job. You're fumbling dynamite, if you only knew it."

"I do know it. But there's a chance that we can get on friendly terms with the Klosohees."

"A mighty slim chance, from what old John tells me. You can't go on without Paul and me."

"We will."

"Your guides'll desert you."

"Then we'll go on by ourselves."

She said it quietly but Curt knew she meant it. Her determination had brought her most of the way to her goal, whatever that goal might be; and she intended to push on to the end.

A mile down stream the two canoes came swinging around a timbered headland.

"If we can make friends with the Klosohees," she said presently, "there wouldn't be any danger at all. You've had a good deal of experience with Indians, Curt; I believe *you* could manage it. I know how you must be feeling toward me—you're angry, you think I'm willful and stubborn. I don't blame you. But— Oh, Curt, I was depending on you so much to help me! I know I don't deserve help, after refusing to take you into my confidence; but won't you, anyway, Curt?"

He wanted to be angry but he could not be, not in the face of her appeal to him. She was throwing herself upon his generosity, begging his help. He could not force himself to be harsh with her.

As he saw the situation, he was forced to take his choice of helping her or letting her go into that country without protection. By themselves she and Ralph simply did not stand a chance. That great blue cleft up river would prove a one-way portal into Klosohee territory. Perhaps he *could* work himself into the good graces of the Klosohees. If so, the whole danger would blow over, as she had said. At any rate Paul and he would be guarding her.

They could go cautiously, keep their eyes open, and bring her back to safety if trouble started popping.

He did not like the prospect. She would be exposed to danger, however careful he and Paul might be; and he would be sadly handicapped on the Karakhan hunt. But the alternative was to let her go through that pass unprotected, defenseless; and that was something he could not do.

Sonya was watching him, hanging upon his decision. Curt saw her fingers trembling as she waited. He thought it fine of her that in those moments she made not the slightest attempt to sway him by her charm or her powers as a girl.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Sonya," he said finally. "It's this: I'll take you in there and do everything I can with those Klosohees; but if I see that a friendly contact isn't possible, you're to let Paul and me bring you back out, and you'll go on south to Russian Lake. Will you agree to that?"

Sonya clasped his hand. "Curt, that's awfully splendid of you!"

"You promise, then? You'll turn back when I give the word, and you promise you'll go straight south to Russian Lake?"

"Yes, I promise."

## CHAPTER VIII

AT the mouth of the pass the next morning, Curt stood up in his canoe for a last look ahead. He had the uneasy feeling that eyes were watching his three canoes and dusky hands were toying with fluted arrows.

The pass was more than a mile long, with a strong current to buck and no midstream islets to take refuge on. He and Paul had scouted it out that morning while the others were still asleep, and had discovered only one favorable circumstance. Sometime that spring a lightning fire had swept down the east shore, cutting a swath half a mile wide. In the paper birches and resiny pines it had been a scorcher, licking up plants, shrubbery, deerbush, and burning to the very water edge. Along that whole east shore there was hardly a place where a rabbit could have made its form. If the Klosohees were watching the pass, they had to be on the west side. By hugging the east landwash with his party, he could make them shoot all the way across the river. No bows that he had ever seen



could do effective work at that distance.

Before sitting down, he gave his final orders: "Paul and I'll lead, Sonya and François'll come next, Ralph and Jocku last. We'll keep strung out in single file so it'll be harder to hit us. One other thing—nobody shoots at those men unless I say shoot. Jocku, that's meant for you and François."

They skirled into the narrows. In spite of the stiff current they put the rods behind them, hoping to slide through unmo-  
lested.

Everything was quiet along that west shore. Sandpipers teetered up and down the wave edge; butterflies flitted over the bars; birds came winging out of the timber to take a billful of water to their fledglings.

A quarter way through, it happened—the thing Curt had expected. Twenty yards ahead of his canoe something plunked into the water. Watching the opposite shore closely, he saw a second object, so swift that it seemed a mere flash, come whizzing out of a rocky ravine and sail across the river in a low graceful arch. It too fell ahead. Another and another followed, not aimed at the three craft but deliberately placed in front, as a warning to turn back. They came faster and faster till perhaps fifty arrows had been shot. Then they suddenly stopped.

The range of those horn bows daunted Curt. They *could* do damage at that distance. They could do deadly work. One arrow, drawn by a strong hand, had not only sailed all the way across the river and struck a drift log lying out on the sand, but had struck so hard that it buried its head in the wood and stood there with its shaft quivering like a rattlesnake's tail.

He stopped and let Sonya's craft glide up alongside.

"You lie down, girl, flat in your canoe. Don't expose yourself; you'll be taking chances on your life if you do." He pulled her blanket roll beside her and laid his own sleeping poke on top of it for extra protection. "François, you and Jocku dip those paddles deep and fast! The quicker we get through here, the less time they'll have to make targets of us."

They skimmed on, hugging the east landwash.

As they came exactly opposite the rocky ravine, the Kloshees opened on them again, this time in earnest.

If the arrows had come singly, they could have been dodged by an alert person, for their polished heads glinted in the sun and their flight was visible at the height of its arch. But they came too thick to watch. One struck Paul's paddle, raised for a stroke, and pierced clear through the ash-heart blade. One hit the canoe in front of Curt's knees, clipped through the thin side, and whanged into the spruce-gum pot. Behind him somebody yelled. He turned and saw François grabbing at his hat as it fell into the water with an arrow through the crown.

Ralph had gone pale, but he kept his eyes straight ahead and was paddling valiantly. Tenderfoot though he was, in those hectic moments that brought out a man's real nature he showed more courage than the 'breeds who had spent all their lives in the bush.

Disobeying orders, Sonya had sat up, seized her paddle and was helping François.

"Get down!" Curt ordered her. "Don't you know you're liable to be killed?"

Sonya shook her head as though saying, "Well, aren't the rest of you?" An instant later a vicious arrow whizzed over her, so low that she dodged and gasped. Another splintered the thwart she was sitting against. A third hit the sleeping poke which Curt had placed at her side. If the arrow had not been there, that third arrow would have shot her through the breast.

François shipped paddle and grabbed for his rifle.

"Drop that!" Curt snapped at him. "You can't touch 'em. They're in cover, we're on open water. That paddle will get you out of danger quicker than a gun!"

Bent low, they clipped on up stream, trusting to sheer luck.

Slowly the arrows tailed off, began falling behind, and finally stopped altogether as the range became too great.

Curt let the other two canoes catch up and looked them over. Nineteen arrows in the three craft!—it was a miracle that none of his companions had been killed or wounded. Ralph flicked the sweat from his face and stared across at the forbidding woods, with fright in his eyes. François and Jocku were ready to turn in their tracks and whip back south. Sonya was the coolest of the lot. She took danger like an old hand, as though used to it.

He picked the arrow out of the sleeping  
 spoke and examined it curiously. A superb  
 piece of workmanship, its obsidian head  
 was pointed to needle sharpness and its  
 shaft was neatly feathered with split hawk-  
 quills. It was a hunting arrow, for it had  
 four deep flutes along its sides to drain  
 off the blood. He shivered to think how  
 near it had come to killing Sonya.

Paul touched his arm and pointed to the  
 rocky ravine across the river.

"They're leaving the *ravin-là*! Watch.  
 There by the four birches goes one now!"

Curt glimpsed a shadowy figure slipping  
 into a buck-brush thicket. Another and  
 another followed. Eight of them. To be  
 only eight, they certainly had let loose a  
 flock of arrows!

He knew why they were hurrying up  
 stream. Their first ambush had failed but  
 they still had time to lay another one be-  
 fore his party could get through the pass.  
 No use to race them; they were loping  
 along a game trail while his canoes were  
 fighting a ten-mile current. There was  
 nothing to do but go ahead, keep a sharp  
 lookout, and try to get by them again.

He gave the word, and his party went  
 on.

Near the upper end of the narrows a  
 long granite rock jutted out into the river,  
 extending fully a third of the way across;  
 and at its tip a big pile of break-up *débris*  
 had lodged, quite sufficient to hide eight  
 men. Curt looked at it sharply as the  
 canoes approached. If the Klosohees were  
 hiding there, it was suicide to try to get  
 past.

ON above it lay a big river-widening,  
 the end of the pass. It tempted him,  
 that broad sun-glistening water. In ten  
 minutes his party could be skimming out  
 upon it.

He reached his binoculars, drew the  
 granite rock up close, studied the pile of  
*débris*, but saw nothing suspicious. He had  
 almost made up his mind to take the  
 risk, when a magpie with a stolen egg in  
 its bill came flapping down stream. Di-  
 rectly above the rock it suddenly breasted  
 up high, nearly tumbled over itself in the  
 air, dropped the egg, and veered abruptly  
 out across the river.

Curt and Paul looked knowingly at each  
 other. That magpie was a dead give-away.  
 There were men lying behind that drift.

The three canoes pulled in to shore and

landed. Paul fingered his rifle and es-  
 timated the distance across to the rock.

"If I buzz their ears with some lead  
 bumblebees, *compagnon*, they'll scramble  
 out of there into the woods. I can scorch  
 them without killing any."

Curt shook his head. "Paul, when we  
 once shoot at 'em, we can say good-by to  
 our chances of ever getting on friendly  
 terms."

"Well then, we're stopped."

Sonya spoke up. "I know how you can  
 do it! We're not stopped! We can't pass  
 them on the river, but why can't we por-  
 tage around them? Just as we would at a  
 rapids or falls!"

The move was so simple and self-evident  
 that Curt felt ashamed for not thinking  
 of it himself. If his party kept three hun-  
 dred feet back from the water edge, they  
 would be entirely safe. They could por-  
 tage their stuff at one hitch and be up  
 at that widening in ten minutes.

Paul and François shouldered one canoe,  
 load and all, trudged across the beach to  
 the *brûlé*, and headed for the embarque  
 above. Jocku and Ralph staggered after  
 them with the second. Curt handed the  
 paddles and his rifle to Sonya, swung up  
 the third canoe and followed.

At the embarque he put down his load,  
 told the others to wait there, and started  
 back along the beach.

Directly opposite the ambush he walked  
 out on the sand to the river edge, palms  
 out in the sign for peace. It was a risky  
 act; at so short a range he was completely  
 at their mercy. But old John had said  
 they were a square-shooting outfit, and  
 he felt he could bank on Paxton's opinion.

He saw a move or two yonder in the  
 drift, but not an arrow came at him.

Calling across to them in the Chinook  
 Jargon, he tried to work up a palaver. . . .  
 His party came as friends. He intended  
 to stay only a short moon in the Lilluar  
 ranges. He had ordered his men not to lift  
 the shoot-stick against the Klosohees. Why  
 then should the Klosohees try to kill them?  
 Would they send a *wah-wah* man across  
 to talk with him and learn that the  
 strangers brought no harm? . . .

The only answer he got was his own echo  
 flouncing back from the wall of spruces.

"Maybe they don't *kumtux* the Jargon,"  
 he thought; and he called across again, us-  
 ing sign language and the few Dinneh  
 words he knew.

Still no answer. Not a syllable.

Piling up several flat rocks, he laid out an array of presents — tobacco, six fine hunting knives which he had brought along for that purpose, and a big carton of sugar cubes, the best present of all, for most of the northern tribes he had known were badly sugar-starved.

As he turned away, a little wisp of cloud-white puffed out from the drift; the sharp *kri-ii-ng* of a rifle smacked across the water; a murderous bullet burned through the leather of his jacket, not three inches from his heart.

He whirled around to run. Along the whole beach there was not a single boulder or drift-pile big enough to hide behind, and the nearest *brûlé* snag was more than two hundred yards away. He made a dash for it, weaving as he ran.

He realized it was the 'breed, LeNoir, who had shot at him. The Kloshees had no rifles. Still in good range on the open beach, he expected every instant to hear that sharp-speaking Savage again. But nothing happened. Why wasn't the 'breed trying to cut him down?

To his own bewilderment he reached the snag and leaped behind it without another bullet coming his way.

Up at the embarque Paul had seen the cowardly shot, and was loping down the shore to rescue or avenge his partner. Curt motioned him back.

"It's all right, Paul. He can't touch me here. Stay out of reach."

As he crouched behind the snag and looked across at the drift, he gradually saw through the queer incident. At so deadly a range LeNoir had felt sure of killing him with a single shot; and had whipped up his gun and fired. But his bullet had missed its mark, and before he could shoot again the Indians had seized his rifle and stopped him. That was the only explanation of the solitary shot. Those Kloshees had refused to harm or let anyone else harm a person who was laying out presents for them.

In spite of that ugly hole through his sleeve, the incident seemed a good omen to Curt, and for the first time he really believed that he was going to win the Kloshees over. They were honest men, in their own primitive way, as old Paxton and Inspector Jamieson had said. With tact and patience he might make friends of them yet.

TWO hours north of the pass they probably to a place where the Lilluar spread into a big lakelike widening. Though the day was still young, Curt decided to do it at once. His party was badly shaken; two of the canoes were leaking, and he did not intend to get any farther from the pass, his gateway of escape, till he definitely what to expect from the sohees.

He stood up and looked the lake over. It was dotted with little islands, some wooded, some bare. With his glasses he studied two small ones that lay isolated in the middle. One was a strip of land covered with red willows. The other, fifty yards to the east, was a mere half-acre of pea-gravel and boulders. No pleasant defensive points. It was free of timber, Indian's own element; he could build a barricade of those rocks; and the thousands of open water all around made surprise attack impossible.

He led the way over, landed, and his party to work. They cooked a meal, repaired the canoes, brought a small quantity of fuel logs from a wooded island, pitched the tents, built a tiny fort of the boulders and made sentry boxes on the north and west beaches.

On the east shore of the lake a large tributary river came winding in from the mountains. Curt climbed on top of the barricade, got out old John's chart, and identified the river as the Iskitimwah. Even its three-pronged delta was exactly as Paxton had drawn it. Ruefully his eyes followed the stream back into the ranges. Old John's trapping lake, twenty-five miles east, he had a rendezvous to keep. On the chance that a plane in the Lilluar country might come in handy, he had instructed Smash to meet him there with the Fairchild. The rendezvous was two days past already.

"One devil of a chance I've got of ever meeting Smash," he swore, "tied up as I am. I can't stir an inch away from this outfit."

All that afternoon he kept watching around the lake shore, trying to spot the Kloshees camp. If he could locate it, he intended to get into his canoe and go over there alone. The Kloshees had already showed they were not treacherous; and they would respect a bold act like that. Once he got into a talk with them he could



they probably swing the band away from Le-  
read Noir and get on a friendly footing.

ough The afternoon passed, twilight crept into  
to the mountain valley. After supper he  
taken shoveled sand over the coals and gave his  
and instructions:

from "No fires tonight, no matches struck, no  
he talking above a low tone. Nobody is to  
he go into those tents or anywhere near them.

If there's any shooting done, Paul and I'll  
do it. François, if you and Jocku get us  
into trouble with those itchy trigger fingers,  
I'll set you off on a mosquito island in your  
bare skin. I want you to keep strictly out  
of this. Now understand me."

er, f He let Paul have the west side, which  
acred faced the little willow island. Taking rifle  
t and automatic, he himself went up to the  
d tip to watch the north and east.

er, The peaks of the western range were  
still tinged with an orange glow, but the  
mountain valley was filled with black  
shadow up to timberline. It was like a  
basin full of blackness, with a faint light  
around the rim. A bright moon overhead  
turned the waters to wavy silver. He was  
thankful for that friendly moon; sentry-go  
was infinitely easier than in darkness.

Before settling down behind the rocks,  
he went to the water edge and bathed his  
face and hands to make himself alert. Since  
leaving Russian Lake he had not slept  
thirty hours altogether; and the previous  
night, standing guard alone in order that  
Paul could get some rest, he had not closed  
his eyes.

The night was so quiet that over on  
the mainland, half a mile away, he heard  
the death scream of a rabbit as an owl  
struck talons into it. Two male grizzlies,  
prowling along the landwash for dead fish,  
ran afoul of each other. For minutes he  
listened to their bloodchilling snarls and  
bellows, till one finally dragged itself off,  
whimpering and groaning.

Five hundred yards north two merganser  
ducks started calling back and forth. For  
a time he paid no attention but when they  
kept it up longer than ducks should have  
done, he began listening closely. The calls  
sounded all right, he could detect nothing  
wrong about them; but he had his sus-  
picions. *Maybe* it was a pair of ducks out  
there. And maybe a pair of canoes signal-  
ing to each other.

The calls silenced. After a while he  
glimpsed a blurry shadow a pistol shot up  
lake. It was moving, but very slowly.

Through the dim light he peered at it.  
Driftwood log, or a swirl in the current,  
or just his imagination? Something silvery  
glinted. The glint appeared and vanished  
rhythmically. He wondered what it could  
be. Then suddenly he knew—moon gleam  
on a wet paddle blade!

Fifty yards away the canoe stopped and  
hovered motionless. A figure stood up in  
it and stared down toward the island. For  
perhaps five minutes the craft hovered  
there. Then it slowly backed away, blurred  
to nothingness, disappeared.

"Spying out our camp!" Curt breathed  
to himself. "Means they're going to spring  
something on us tonight."

Gradually the pink glow faded from the  
mountain peaks. A big cloud hove in sight  
over the eastern range. Curt watched it  
anxiously, afraid it would come on west  
and blot out the moon and plunge the lake  
into darkness just when he and Paul might  
have to beat off an attack.

Moccasined footsteps came up the west  
landwash. Paul, he thought. A moving  
blur shaped itself to a human figure. Then  
he saw it was not Paul.

A dozen steps away the figure stopped,  
looked around for him.

"Sonya," he called quietly.

She came on to the little barricade. "Is  
one allowed to talk to the guard?" she  
asked. She crouched down with him. "I  
brought you one of my blankets and a  
tincup of coffee. I raked enough sand off  
the fire to heat this, but I didn't expose  
the coals—you told us not to."

Curt squeezed her hand. "It was sweet  
of you—all the trouble, dear. But you'd  
better take the blanket. This mountain air  
gets chilly when a person isn't moving  
around." He put the blanket about her  
shoulders.

"Thanks, Curt. The air does have a  
bite in it."

**S**HE did not free her hand or object to his  
endearing word. As she leaned against  
the rocks he saw that her eyes were heavy.  
Poor kid, the trip was going hard with her.  
"Tired?" he asked gently.

"A little."

He put his arm around her and made her  
snuggle against him. "Isn't that better,  
dear?"

"Lots, Curt!" But then she caught her-  
self up and admitted more cautiously, "I  
mean—lots better than the cold rocks."

His lips touched her hair, her forehead. "Sonya, look up at me."

"Don't, Curt—please—" a whisper of protest from her as he sought her lips. She would not allow him. "Dear, you *must* not." She reached up her hand and touched his hair, running her fingers over it. "Curt, you've been so good, you're so unselfish and generous—I'd hate myself if I caused you any pain."

"Pain—to me? Why Sonya, you couldn't do that!"

"But I could! You'll want me—you do even now, Curt—to be more than a friend; and I don't—can't—"

Curt started a little. "'Can't?'" he repeated. "Do you mean that we—that I can't be more than a friend?"

Sonya refused to answer his question outright. She went on, reproachfully of herself: "I shouldn't have accepted your offer that time, Curt. But I did need help badly; after what happened today I know how small a chance Ralph and I would have stood without you; but I should have thought more of your good and less of my own."

He demanded impetuously, "Sonya, when are you going to tell me the truth about this wild trip you're making?"

"Please, Curt, I'd rather not talk about it."

"You've never told me anything at all about yourself. I don't even know your name, your real name."

"Does that matter?"

"Or where you came from, or where you're going when this trip's ended. Is that fair, Sonya?"

"It's grossly unfair. But I can't help myself. When this trip is over, maybe then I can afford to be honest. I don't blame you for asking questions, but . . . I think I'll go back to the rocks down there."

"Please don't," Curt begged, realizing that he was driving her away by his questions. "I won't ask any more. But some day I'm going to ask them, and a lot of them, Sonya."

"And some day I'll answer them."

She leaned her tired head back against his shoulder, but Curt felt she was far away from him, alone with her own thoughts.

Moccasined footsteps again, quick footsteps, very near the sentry box. Sonya hastily freed herself, and drew apart from Curt.

"*Compagnon—?*"

"Here, Paul."

The young Canadian came up to them. "A party just landed on the willow island. They lifted out four canoes, and they're over in that brush."

The news startled Curt. This was the attack. Those Klosohees over there must be planning to dart across the channel and fall upon the camp.

"Only four canoes?" he asked.

"Only four. I think they are carrying two men apiece. One turned broadside to the moon's reflection and I saw it distinctly. It carried just two."

"That means we've only got eight men to deal with. Those eight we saw today. After a few moments' thought, he directed 'You go back to your post, Paul. If they start across, try to stop 'em by shooting over their heads. If they keep coming on, ricochet your bullets through their canoes. I'll stay here and watch for others. They may be planning to box us from two sides. If that party over there is the only one, I'll help you head 'em the other way.'"

When Paul had left, he suggested: "I'd better take you back to the boulders, Sonya. It's safer there. We'll likely have some swift work for a minute or two."

"I'd rather stay here, if you'll let me. I'll be safe enough, and I don't want to be hiding among those rocks while you and Paul are standing the whole brunt. I can help, too, if it comes to a real fight."

HER hand crept inside her blouse, and she came out with some black metallic object. Curt saw it was a small automatic, a little purse-size thing, but nevertheless an effective weapon for close work.

On the willow island he saw nothing, heard nothing. The minutes dragged by interminably. He almost wished the fight would start. Anything was better than waiting, waiting.

The big cloud had drifted on out from the eastern range till it was only a little distance from the moon. In ten minutes more it would shut off the wan light and spread a pall of darkness over the land below.

Down toward the camp a pattering noise suddenly arose. It sounded as though the tents and canoes were being pelted with small stones.

Sonya touched his arm. "Curt, what's that?"

"Arrows! They're shooting up our camp. You see, they expected to kill or wound part of us before we got out of our blankets."

"Why," Sonya gasped, "you must've known—that's why you made us stay away from the tents!"

"I didn't *know* they'd do it, but I suspected they might, so I played safe."

The patter of arrows kept up for two or three minutes, then stopped.

"They must be coming across, Curt!" Sonya whispered, peering into the dimness. "I don't see them."

"You won't see them. They're not coming across. I thought they meant to, but I figured wrong. If they'd planned to make an out-and-out attack, they'd never have thrown away their advantage of surprise. They just intend to lie low over there in those willows and shoot up our camp."

"But they've stopped shooting."

"That's because they're all puzzled—no shots or cries from us."

"Maybe they think they killed us all or that we sneaked away before they got here."

"That's an idea. I'd better let 'em know we're still around, or they *might* come across to investigate."

He called down to Paul, using the Jar-gon so that the Klososhees would understand:

"Are the mosquitoes bad there with you, friend? It seems to me that a whole flock of them are buzzing out of those willows yonder."

Paul took the hint and answered, with a scornful laugh: "They are bad, yes; but their buzzing does not annoy me much. *Splaa!* They are nothing for a *man* to worry about."

At the two voices, the Klososhees let loose a storm of darts. A part of them came at Curt and Sonya, for he had given away his location by calling. They hit in the sand, whizzed overhead, slugged into the rocks of his barricade. He pushed Sonya forcibly down behind the shelter. "Keep down, girl! If one of those ever hits you, there won't be any mosquito joke about it."

The attack would have worn itself out harmlessly if the two 'breeds had obeyed orders. But the shower of arrows sprinkling the camp and thudding into the boulder nest had got them jumpy. François jabbered something in excited voice to

Jocku. An instant later their heavy "bear" Winchesters split the silence with a blaring *kroom*.

"Stop that!" Curt yelled at them. "Keep those guns out of this, you two!"

Paul turned around and gave them a blistering in Strong-Woods French. They disregarded him, paid no attention to Curt's frantic order, but emptied their whole magazines at the willows.

Over on the island a man cried out, the long-drawn cry of a man hard hit.

Curt sprang to his feet. "You damned crazy loons!—stop that shooting or I'll come down there and shoot you!"

They did break off, then. He thought his threat had stopped them, but he found out later that Paul had sprung back to the rock nest and disarmed them at the point of his gun.

At the cry of the wounded man the arrows had tailed off abruptly. They did not start up again at all. For many minutes he and Sonya waited and listened. Once he heard a swishing in the brush across the channel. A little later he thought he heard the splash of a canoe being set to water.

About twenty minutes afterward Paul came walking up the landwash.

"Gone?" Curt asked.

"Yes. They're over on the mainland by now."

The good news left Curt cold. The attack had been beaten off easily enough, but an irreparable damage had been done. One of those men had been wounded, maybe killed. Blood spilled, Indian blood—it was a catastrophe. The crazy bang-banging of those two cowardly 'breeds had exploded his last hope of making friends with that band.

## CHAPTER IX

**W**HEN they got down to camp they found the place badly shot up. Arrows bristled in the canoes, stuck out of the packs and sleeping bags; and both tents had been riddled.

Paul went into his tent for a flashlight and came out, holding his left arm queerly. "Give me a hand with this, *compagnon*."

"What's the trouble?"

"One of those mosquitoes bit me."

Curt leaned forward. "Good Lord!" An arrow was sticking in Paul's left forearm. It had struck him just below the elbow and



passed clear through, the head standing out two inches on the other side.

"Paul! Why didn't you tell me about this before? When did it happen?"

"When I was going back to those boulders to make François and Jocku quit shooting."

Curt whirled around in a rage and looked for the two 'breeds. But they had wisely sidled away into the dark, after shooting the Indian and causing Paul to get shot.

"Did it break your arm, Paul?"

"No. It slid between the bones. Pull it out, won't you?"

Curt brought his little medicine kit from the tent. While Sonya held the flash, he cut off the head of the arrow and took hold of the feathered shank to pull. A shiver went through Paul. Sonya turned her head away.

"It's going to hurt, Paul. Can you stand it?"

Paul braced his foot against Curt's. "*Allons donc! Tirez dehors!*"

Sonya steadied his arm. With a firm pull Curt drew out the arrow, as gently as he could. A spasm of pain swept across the young Canadian's face, but he did not say a word. A tricklet of blood followed, surprisingly little for so bad a wound.

"We ought to be thankful it didn't hit that large artery in there, Paul. I'll fix this up properly, and then you want to take care of it till it starts to heal. A wound like that can be ugly if it gets infected."

While he was bandaging Paul's arm, he heard a low groaning sound from somewhere out in the night. A moment later it came again, more distinctly.

"Why, it's somebody hurt, in pain!" Sonya exclaimed. "Maybe it's François or Jocku."

"Can't be. They'd have let us know about it before now. Paul, did you catch the direction?"

"Over on that willow island."

"Then it must be the man they shot! Those others thought he was dead and left him."

Finishing quickly with Paul, he got a canoe ready and carried it down to the water. The anguish in that low moan tugged at him. He felt personally guilty for the act of those two 'breeds. He was an intruder into Klososhee territory; they had a right to hate whites; and besides, they had saved his life, less than twenty-four hours ago, when they took LeNoir's gun away from the 'breed there in the pass.

Sonya followed him to the water edge. "Please, Curt," she begged, "don't run a big risk like this. Don't take chances with yourself."

"Risk"—? What d'you mean?"

"Those others might still be over there. This might be a trap. Don't go." She was visibly afraid for him. "Wait till it gets light."

"But Paul saw them leave, Sonya. Somebody's got to go. We can't let the poor devil lie over there and die."

"You're sure there's no danger?"

"Step in," he bade her, by way of answer. "You can go along, if you like. You know I wouldn't take you if there was any risk."

He shoved away and they skirled across to the island.

At the willows' edge a Klososhee, clad in moccasins and deerskin trousers, lay sprawled on the gravel, face down, his body twitching in pain. By his outstretched arm lay a ram-horn bow, a moosehide quiver with a few arrows in it, and a light caribou spear.

Curt knelt down and gently turned him over. The Indian was about his own age, a well-built and rugged man, his hair coarse black and his skin the color of smoked leather. All in all he was the wildest-looking fellow that Curt had ever run across.

Curt pointed at five long whitish weals which scored the Indian's left cheek and ran down his shoulder to his breast. "Look at those, Sonya. He's been in a fight with a grizzly some time or other. And at close quarters—closer than I'd ever like to get."

He examined the Indian to see how badly he had been shot. One bullet had struck him in the shoulder, a painful but not critical wound, for it had not shattered the bones. Another had hit him squarely in the forehead. That forehead wound astonished Curt. It was the first time he had ever seen a man take a bullet between the eyes and not get killed instantly.

He brought water and washed away the clotted blood from the Indian's face. A granite pebble, no larger than a pea, was lodged in the forehead wound. Curt pried it out with his knife point, examined the wound and the granite pebble, and suddenly understood what had happened to the Klososhee. One of those heavy Winchester bullets had *splatted* into the gravel in front of him, kicked that stone against

his head, and knocked him senseless. Stretched out limp, with a hole between his eyes—no wonder the others had thought him dead!

The cold water on the Klosohee's face brought him to in a few moments. His eyes flickered open. He glanced about, slowly piecing together where he was. When he looked up at Curt and saw that a white man was bending over him, his eyes turned suddenly cold. His glance fell upon the hunting knife in Curt's hand, and his expression changed to a stony tight-lipped defiance. Too weak to move, he merely stared up at his enemy, and waited.

"Why's he looking at you that way, Curt?" Sonya asked. She had stooped down to hold the flash.

"Good heavens, he thinks I'm going to kill him!" He hastily pocketed his knife. "Well, he's certainly a stoical cuss!"

He spoke in the Jargon to the Indian: "Don't be afraid. I am friend. I hear you say hurt-cry, and I come over here. I take you now to my tepee and make you no-sick. You *kumtux* I am friend?"

The Indian's look slowly changed to bewilderment. He had expected to get that knife between his ribs, and the knife was sheathed! He had expected the white-skin to gloat over him before finishing him off, and the stranger was speaking in tones of sympathy and kindness!

"What name you?" Curt asked. He tapped his own breast. "*Nika*, Curt. *Mesika*—?"

"Hai-ee-Tenn-Ogshamowam."

Curt smiled. "S'pose I call you Tenn-Og, huh? *Mesika* name too *hyas-hyas* for white-man tongue. Now we take you to tepee across *chuck*."

He picked the Indian up and put him into the canoe. Sonya laid in the bow, spear and quiver; and they crossed to camp.

IN the tent he gave the Klosohee a drink of diluted brandy to brace him, and then began dressing the wounds. The shoulder bullet had gone almost entirely through; it lay as a bulge under the skin on the back. Curt extracted it, stopped the bleeding, bandaged the wound, and stuck a cross of plaster on the forehead.

Feeling stronger, Tenn-Og leaned back against a pack, watching the three. His glittering black eyes went from Curt to Paul and Sonya, and back to Curt again.

"I guess he's convinced we're not going to kill him, at least not immediately," Curt remarked. "Now if he just doesn't get the idea that we're cannibals and're saving him for a clam-bake, we'll be all right. Let's try out his lingo, Paul, and see if he speaks anything besides grizzly bear and porcupine."

They sat down in front of him, pointed to things and asked him questions. They discovered that he understood a few words in the Jargon, which Curt spoke; a few words in Sikanni, which Paul knew; and that he spoke Dinneh very well, of which both the others had a smattering.

Between those tongues, eked out with signs, they managed a three-cornered conversation. The Indian talked readily enough, freely answering all their questions about his people and giving them some invaluable bits of information about Siam-Klale and LeNoir. Curt was surprised that he should do this and should seem so indifferent toward his own clan. It was only later, when he knew Tenn-Og better and had heard his strange tragic story, that he understood why the Indian had opened up to them in the tent that night.

Leading off with some general questions about the Klosohees, he learned that the southern band had broken away from the main group because of Siam-Klale's tyranny. Middle-aged, apparently having some queer twist of cruelty in his makeup, the tribe leader ruled with a brutal hand. He had a shrewd brain, he was as strong as a cave grizzly; and no one had courage to oppose him or head a revolt. Within Tenn-Og's memory he had killed three men outright and made broken cripples of several others. Besides that, he possessed a shaman power of dealing some quick mysterious death to anybody he disliked.

"Sounds like poison," Curt remarked to Paul. "I shouldn't be surprised to find LeNoir is slipping him strychnine powder. It'd be about like the 'breed; old John told me he was mixed up in a poison case over in the God's Lake country. Say, I wonder if this isn't the explanation of LeNoir's stand-in with Siam-Klale!"

"Let's ask him about the man we're interested in," Paul suggested, speaking French so that Tenn-Og could not understand.

"Better not, Paul. He might get back to his band and report our questions. If

m'sieu ever found out that a pair of strangers was in this country making inquiries about him, he'd jump into his plane and get gone."

He turned to the Indian and went on with his questioning. LeNoir had planned the attack that evening, Tenn-Og said, but had stayed on the mainland shore and taken no part in the fight. The Kloshees had wanted to wait until Siam-Klale's strong band could come, but LeNoir had insisted on a surprise raid at night. He had ordered that the men should be killed, their bodies sunk in the lake with rocks, and their canoes set adrift down the Lilluar, to give the appearance of a rapids disaster; but the white girl must not be hurt, if they could possibly help it.

Curt wondered why LeNoir had given those orders about Sonya. Certainly the 'breed hadn't intended that she should return to Russian Lake, for she would report how the party had met its end. Had he wanted her spared so that he could have her himself? Possibly. In that mountain fastness, with oblivion settled over her and her party, no whisper of his crime would ever have leaked out.

"Will this band of yours attack us again tomorrow night," he asked Tenn-Og, "or wait till they're strengthened by Siam-Klale's men?"

Tenn-Og said positively they would wait. It was only at LeNoir's insistence that they had not done so in the first place.

"How long will it be till these other men can get here?"

It would take a runner two suns and two nights to reach Siam-Klale's band, and three suns and two nights for the band to come south.

CURT continued his questioning for a while but learned nothing more of any great importance. The information that it would be several days before the other Kloshees would get there gave him an idea. His party would not need him during that time. He certainly could put that freedom to good use. For one thing he could keep that rendezvous with Smash; and for another he could find out something about Sonya—who she was, what lay behind this strange trip of hers. She herself would not tell him, but he believed he could easily enough get at the truth by a roundabout bit of strategy.

More and more he had become con-

vinced that her trip was some crucial and weighty mission. He had made up his mind to stop his own search temporarily and see her through; but he could do nothing so long as he was working in the dark. His hunt for Karakhan was already at a standstill; she was all tangled up in it, and he was hampered by a clumsy party. The quick and clean-cut way of handling the muddled situation was to find out her mission, drive it through for her, and then go after Karakhan.

Outside the tent he and Paul talked his plans over and agreed on them.

"I'd better leave now," Curt concluded. "When day breaks I've got to be far enough away from here that the Kloshees can't spot me. Sneak my canoe down to the lower end of the island, Paul. Don't let these others know what you're doing. Put in one blanket, one paddle and a bit of grub. Now Paul, you'll be in charge here while I'm gone. Everything'll be up to you. Keep a good guard at night, and make François and Jocku walk the chalk line."

At the fire he talked a few words with Sonya, who was making the Indian some hot broth. Paul came back presently and gave him the sign that all was ready. Slipping away from camp, Curt hurried down to the canoe, pushed off, and crossed the dark lake to the Iskitimwah mouth.

Not until he started up the river on his lone trip did he realize how desperately tired he was. Three nights hand-run without sleep, the brush in the pass that morning and the fight two hours ago—it was the climax to a whole week of heavy strain.

Daybreak found him stumbling exhaustedly across a long portage ten miles up the Iskitimwah. When the sun rose, he was halfway to his goal. At an overfalls pool he stripped off his clothes, bathed in the icy green swirl and forged ahead.

At midmorning he paddled out upon the lake that was old John's winter home.

On the south shore, where a log cabin nestled under the pines, his glistening Fairchild was riding at anchor. With a great sigh of relief he dipped his weary paddle and headed for the ship. An exultation lightened his weariness. Time and distance, man's two old enemies in the vast North, dwindled to nothing when one stepped into a plane.

Smash came out of the cabin and caught the prow of the canoe as it nosed ashore.



"Hullo, old man! I began to think you wasn't going to show up at all.

"How long've you been waiting?"

"Three days."

"Have any trouble finding the place?"

"Not a speck. That chart was a beaut. What d'you say—what's on deck?"

Curt beached the canoe and untied the mooring ropes of the plane. "We're leaving here. You take the controls."

Inside the cabin he unfastened the mechanic's seat and rear place, stowed them in the fuselage cubby, and made himself a pallet on the floor.

Smash climbed in with the coiled ropes. "Where to, old man? North, east, south, west, or straight up?"

"South," Curt bade. "To Vancouver. And don't let any ducks roost on your pontoons while you're getting there."

Smash started the motor, stood out upon the lake, lifted the ship onto the step, took off, and circled for altitude. High enough to clear the ranges, he headed south.

As he passed over the first towering snow-cap, he glanced down at his partner. With packchute for a pillow and an arm bent under his head, Curt was dead asleep.

## CHAPTER X

IT was the stopping of the engine that roused Curt. He had become so accustomed to the throbbing roar through many hours that the sudden silence jarred him wide awake.

He sat up, trying to place himself. Smash was slumped down in the pilot's seat. Outside somebody was warping the Fairchild alongside a pier and making it fast.

He slid open a panel and looked out. It was early dusk. They were in some good-sized city—a mass of buildings stood limned against the sky.

"Where are we, Smash—Prince Rupert?"

Smash stared at him. "Hell's bells, man, you're in Vancouver!"

"Vancouver? Already?"

"You mean all day. You've been batting it off for ten hours straight." He yawned tremendously. "Ar-rr-rum-mm!—I could use some sleep myself, after a ten-hour drag at the stick."

They stepped out upon the pier. Curt glanced around and blinked his eyes. He had gone to sleep in the heart of the Lilluar wilderness, a thousand miles north;

and now—almost instantly later, it seemed—he woke up in a big city.

In the pier office he called the Marlin home, talked briefly with A-K, promised him a report later that evening, and sent Smash out there.

At Mounted headquarters he found Holden and Inspector Baldwin in the latter's private office, polishing their plans for a narcotic raid that night. When he knocked and went in, Baldwin looked around and saw him.

"Hello, Curt, old man!" He got up, shook hands warmly. "Holden and I have been wondering how you were making out." He made Curt take his swivel chair and shoved him the cigarettes.

He took a cigarette and lit it from Baldwin's match. "Oh, I'm letting Karakhan run loose while I follow up a side lead, Arn. If you're not too busy I'd appreciate some help."

"Which you'll get. Holden, take over this hop raid. When you've got those Orientals in the butter-tub, stand by to give Tennyson and me a hand if he needs us both."

Holden nodded and went out to the squad room. Across the desk Curt sketched his work at Tellacet, at Russian Lake, and his trip up the Lilluar.

"Why I came down here to Vancouver, Arn," he explained, "I've got to get complete data on Ralph Nichols and Sonya, and I'd like for you to help me. We won't have much trouble with Nichols. He's from Vancouver; I saw the labels on his clothes and outfit. Here's a roll of films; you'll find two snaps of him on it—the man with the cap. When we place Nichols, we'll go after his acquaintances and get everything we can."

Baldwin scratched notes on a pad. Curt went on:

"We may have more trouble with Sonya. I don't know her last name or where she's from; but I've got four snaps of her in that roll, and I think that when we once place Nichols it'll be easy to get a lead on her. They're close friends and should have mutual acquaintances."

"Right!" Baldwin agreed. He pressed a button and a Mounted constable came in. "Otis, take this roll of films and have prints made in half an hour." He turned to Curt. "While I'm working on Nichols, you can be reporting to A-K. My car's outside. Take it."

"Thanks, Arn. I'll go now. A-K is pretty keen to hear."

On his drive out to the Marlin home Curt prayed that Rosalie would be gone for the weekend, as she usually was. He did not care to face her or talk to her just then. He had no definite thought of ever marrying Sonya Nichols; the whole situation between Sonya and himself was so uncertain and unpredictable that he could not look ahead with any assurance whatever. But his intimacy with Sonya had revealed to him a new and strange vista, unguessed at in all his previous life. In the light of it he saw how shallow his relations with Rosalie were. Hitherto marriage had not seemed of much moment to him and he had been content to drift along. Now it had suddenly become of very great moment.

At the Marlin home A-K answered his ring. Smash had gone to bed, A-K informed, as he took Curt out on the porch. Rosalie too was gone—on a week's yachting trip to Seattle.

"Sorry," Curt mumbled, when he heard that.

A-K brought a pitcher of iced drink, drew two chairs beside the magazine stand, and listened closely to the detailed report. When it was finished, he lit a cigar and gazed down across the far-flung expanse of city lights. The account left him uneasy. Curt had made progress on the hunt, more progress in a fortnight than the Silent Squad and all the others had made in nine months; but the big part of the hunt, and the worst part, still lay ahead, and several features of it looked ominous. A few days previously he had talked with the Indian agent-in-chief about those Lilluar nomads and learned how dangerous they really were. Two men against three dozen—for Curt to go back into those mountains and continue the hunt was like a tryst with death.

And this girl Sonya—who was she, what was she doing in there?

A thought seized him, a startling explanation of her.

"Curt, d'you suppose this girl can be an agent of the G.P.U.? She's Russian, and on a secret job of *some* sort. The G.P.U. want Karakhan badly enough. Maybe they know the weak place in his armor and sent a woman to take him."

Curt shook his head emphatically. "It can't be, A-K. She doesn't like the Soviets. I know that positively. Besides the G.P.U.

supplies its agents with adequate funds, but she's so skimped for money that she hardly has decent clothes for the trip."

"What do you believe she is, then?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Except," he added, "she's a most extraordinary person. I wish you knew her, A-K."

Marlin glanced at him. "Why?" he asked, his suspicion almost a certainty.

"Because you'd like her tremendously. She'd understand why you've stayed with the Mounted for forty years while people like old Macaulay of the Consolidated were making millionaires of themselves."

AS he listened to Curt's attempt to describe her, Marlin felt that instead of liking this Russian girl he would dislike her intensely. He disliked her even then, for he saw that she had crowded Rosalie entirely out of Curt's thoughts.

At eleven the phone rang. Baldwin was calling from a down-town hotel.

"Curt? Arn speaking. Some news for you. Had no trouble with Nichols. Didn't have to go farther than the phone book to place him. He's lived here in Vancouver most of his life. McGill graduate, staff captain overseas, got a V.C. at Vimy. For the last ten years he's been with a city construction company. Their head architect now. Bachelor quarters at the Frasier Club. Nothing out of the ordinary about him that I could dig up, and I've been digging *some*."

"What about the other person?"

"I've got you a bang-up lead to work on. Just talked to a couple of Nichols' friends who've met her several times. Her name's Volkov, Sonya Volkov. Lives in Victoria, teaches in a private school, and's secretary for the Émigré Society of Canada. That's all I was able to find out, but I've located a party here who knows her very well, and I think he can give you a lot of details about her. Shall I zip around for you in the staff car? . . . Good, I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Volkov, Sonya Volkov—Curt repeated the name to himself as he went back to the porch. At least he knew her name now, and within an hour he was going to find out something about her life, her background. After that she could never quite vanish from him.

He rejoined Marlin outside. While they waited, A-K remarked casually:

"Did you know that Laydon, the head

of the Provincial Police, is going to be relieved this coming fall?"

"Is that so? Who's taking his place?"

"You."

Curt's cigarette dropped from his fingers. "I?"

"If you want it. The Premier thinks you're a bit young but otherwise he's more than favorable. He phoned me yesterday and asked when you could come to see him for a personal conference.

"No—" he waved Curt's interruption aside—"don't thank me. You've stood by me often enough. This Karakhan hunt, for instance. I'm not doing this because you and I happen to be friends but because I consider you the best available man for that job. It's a major position, Curt. You would be supervising the force all over the province."

Curt wanted nothing to do with the offer, fine as it was. He saw it as another attempt of duty trying to keep him from returning to the far North; another of the invisible bonds that were being thrown around him. But still he did not refuse it outright, then and there.

Baldwin came, and they started down. Parking in a section of dingy stores, Baldwin took him up a creaky stairway and knocked at an apartment.

A young man, a stocky hazel-eyed foreigner, opened the door, saw them, and bowed politely.

"Meester Baldween? My fader he expect you and your freund. Kom in, pliz."

He led them into a small sitting room and stepped out to get his father.

Baldwin gestured at the poverty of the place. "These people are *émigrés*, Curt. Over in the old country they were a landed *boyar* family, with a half-million-acre estate in the Caucasus. Notice how Russian they still are, and they've been over here eleven years."

Curt glanced about the room. Everything in it breathed of imperial Russia—the ikon of Holy Mary, a sword above a bookcase, a cheap lithograph of Nicholas II. It was typically the dwelling of an *émigré*, living in poverty, futilely hoping that some day the old order would be resurrected from its grave and they could return to homeland, estates, ease.

An old man came in the room, followed by the son. His hair was white, his thin face ravaged with furrows. Curt judged

him close to eighty. He was astounded later to learn that the man was only fifty-seven. One single year, packed with the suffering of the *émigrés*' escape, had aged him more than twenty ordinary years would have done.

Baldwin introduced: "Feodor Plekhanov, I wish you to know my comrade, Mr. Ralston. He is the one of whom I spoke."

The old Russian bowed graciously and made them welcome. Curt pitied him. His hand was bony, he looked so tired and despairing, and his eyes seemed to hold some great fear in their depths—memories, probably, of that horror trail out of Siberia.

He broached his purpose carefully. "Mr. Plekhanov, as my friend here told you, I'm a government agent gathering data about the various foreign associations in this country.

"Our object is altogether friendly; we're merely making records of their personnel and activities. Miss Volkov is secretary of your society, and I'd like to find out a few facts about her. My friend tells me that you know her quite well."

"Yes, I have known Lady Sonya for twelve years, and her father before that."

"Lady Sonya—?"

"Her father is Prince Stephn Volkov."

Curt caught his breath sharply. "Prince?" he managed. "A courtesy title?"

Plekhanov smiled, a bit condescendingly. "You know very little about Russian heraldry, friend. The Volkovs are an old Kiev nobility, one of the oldest in the Empire." He told his son, "Bring our guests the picture that Prince Stephn gave us."

CURT whistled beneath his breath. Sonya's father a prince! He had suspected she was well-born. But he had never imagined that her blood was quite so blue, and she herself had not once hinted that she was of noble birth.

"You mentioned her father—does he live here in Canada?"

"At Victoria. And her brother Carl."

"What do they do?"

"When Prince Stephn first came over, he accepted work in a lumber yard as a grader of timber. Like any common *muzhik*." Plekhanov made a gesture of shame at his countryman's lack of pride. "He rose in his employment. He is some



official now, and Carl is a field expert for the company. For a time Lady Sonya was governess in a rich family at Victoria. Now she is teaching language in a private school."

The son handed him a photo, a medium-sized studio portrait. With a queer mixture of feelings Curt looked at the picture of Sonya's father. At his first glance he saw Sonya's resemblance to him. Her stubborn determination and that proud poise to her head came natural—he could see the traits in every line of her father's face.

He passed the photo to Baldwin and listened to what Plekhanov was saying. The old *boyar* seemed to want to tell about Russia, about the Volkovs and himself there; and Curt let him talk on.

He had first met Prince Stephn more than a generation ago in St. Petersburg, Plekhanov said. Sonya's father had been very close to the imperial court at one time, but his liberal views finally brought him into clash with the clique that surrounded the Czarina. As a genteel banishment to Siberia, he was made commissar of the Crown forests along the Yanisei.

When the Empire crashed, he threw in with Kerensky's Provisional Government, organized the vast Irkurtz region in southern Siberia and ruled it for the White Partizans. When Kerensky in turn was overthrown by the Leninists, the Reds put a price on his head. He was automatically condemned to death.

At Irkurtz, Sonya's mother and sister and younger brother were seized and shot, their home burned, their immediate friends killed. Her father was at Vetemsk on the Lena when he got word of the butchery, and by a provident mercy Sonya and Carl were with him at the time. Taking his two surviving children, he fled into the Lena Woods on horseback, a hunted fugitive; and began the long horror of the *émigré's* escape.

From the Amoor to the Ob the Red Revolution had let loose a holocaust that swelled beyond control of the leaders in distant Moscow and Leningrad. A blight of death swept over the land during those ghastly months with the dammed-up oppression of centuries bursting like an avalanche upon the country. Bands of Red marauders combed steppe, forest and piedmont on the hunt for White Partizans. Fugitives, fleeing for the Mongolian or

Chinese borders, lived in caves and logs venturing onward only when the wind would blow shut their tracks. Men abandoned wives and children as the hunt broke down their humanity.

"I met the Volkovs in a woods on Lake Baikal," Plekhanov recounted, his heart full of his subject. "I too was fugitive, my son and I. A small band of us hunted ones had gathered there. Lady Sonya was but thirteen then, and her brother fifteen. It had taken Prince Stephn all winter to bring them across that four hundred miles from Vetemsk. They had frozen, starved, had been wounded; had fought battles to get through the cordons of their enemies. Once they met a roving party of Terrorists, six of them, and wiped out all six and took their guns, horses, food. They were all three wounded badly when they came to Baikal, and sick with malaria, and nearly driven mad—not by what they had endured, but by what they had *seen*."

"Our little band of refugees at Baikal were betrayed by a fisherman. A company of Reds, recruited from the convict colony at Chita, surprised us one night and rode down our camp, with pistols and axes. Only a few of us managed to escape in the dark and cross a river on ice rafts."

"I met the Volkovs again in Mongolian Uрга half a year later. They had won through. As my son and I had. As only one from a hundred of us hunted ones had. At Uрга and Harbin we were looted by bandits and hounded by the authorities; and Russian girls, gentle girls of the refugee families, were preyed upon by the rich Chinese merchants. But Prince Stephn welded us into a band for self-defense and got us through the Peking, and there we scattered to the four winds. . . ."

No wonder, Curt mused, that Sonya had turned on him with such violence when he mildly praised the Leninists that evening in the prison house. And no wonder she seldom smiled. As a young girl she had seen most of her family murdered; had gone through storm, danger and unspeakable hardships; had looked on things to make men blanch. Torn out of her girlhood home, she had been flung up like a bit of human débris on an alien shore.

Gradually swinging Plekhanov away from the *émigré* story, he led the old Russian to talk about the Volkovs in Victoria. But with that phase of their life Plekhanov was not so well acquainted.

They had gone a different road from his, and he saw them rarely. But he did know the lumber company that the men were connected with, the name of the school where Sonya taught, and the address of the Volkov home.

Curt decided that with those good leads it would be easy to run across to Victoria and get the information he wanted. Thanking their host, he and Baldwin went down to the car.

"Well, did you get what you were after, Curt?"

"I've got a good grasp of her background; but nothing he said gives me any idea of what she's doing in the Lilluars."

Baldwin turned on the switch key, snapped it off again.

"Curt, I've been thinking of Sonya Volkov a lot this evening and I've got a theory about this situation. Did you ever wonder whether Karakhan mightn't be at the bottom of this trip of hers?"

"Karakhan—how's that?"

"See here, it's a pretty safe bet that those two were acquainted. They're both Russians, both *émigrés* and outstanding people; and they have a common bond in hating the Soviets. Karakhan must have known her; he made it his business to know *all* the *émigrés* in these two cities. It's another safe bet that Karakhan would have pushed his acquaintance with *her*. Those snaps you took, especially that one of her on the rock—Curt, she's a beautiful girl. As I said, he'd push the acquaintance. The point is, she might have fallen for him—"

"No!" The denial was jolted from Curt. "That's ridiculous."

"I don't see how. Others have. You know the old saying that women love a dash of wickedness."

"Yes, I've heard it. But I also know Sonya Volkov. You don't, Arn."

"Right, but that's all the more reason why my judgment on this may be better than yours. I'm not biased. To put my theory in a nutshell, I believe she's going in there to join Karakhan."

CURT laughed. "Don't be crazy, Arn." "What's crazy about it?"

"The whole ideal! To leave her out of it and argue from Karakhan's viewpoint, he'd never let anybody know where he's hiding. He didn't even allow Jim Gunnar to take him into those mountains."

"Yes, I know; but Curt, think of this: he's been there in that God-forsaken country for nine months; he's gone almost a year without sight of a white woman's face. You know the sort of chap he is. If he felt reasonably sure that Sonya Volkov would join him, you can bank on it that he'd let down the bars of caution enough to slip her the word where he is. And another thing, Curt—we know he threw over Helen Mathieson and took up with another girl just a few weeks before he pitched off. We've never found out who that other girl was. I'll bet my governor's title against a shirt-button that it was Sonya Volkov!"

Curt turned the switch key and stepped on the starter. "Your 'theory' is a waste of time. Let's be getting somewhere, if you're going to drive."

They drove back to the Marlin home, mapped out their program for the following day, and separated.

Early the next morning they met at the pier and flew across to Victoria. Baldwin started out to cover the private school where Sonya taught. Curt took the other leads as his part.

He went first to the office of the lumber company to meet her father, confident that he would need go no further. To his keen disappointment her father and brother were both gone on a long trip to Vladivostok on business. He was surprised to hear this. Sonya had led him to believe that Russian soil was distinctly dangerous for the Volkovs. Evidently her father had managed a *rapprochement* with the Soviet authorities.

He located the president of the *Émigré* Society. He struck up an acquaintance with the man, went home with him for lunch, and met his wife and his three vivacious daughters. The girls were near Sonya's age, close friends of hers, and they saw her at least every week. In an hour's talk with those three Curt turned her private life inside out. But nothing that they said gave him any clue to her trip north.

As a last hope he taxied out to the Volkov home, a charming cottage on Mountain Road, with three old elms in front and a rock garden and tennis court back of it. The house was locked, the shades drawn, a dozen accumulated newspapers on the front porch. As he expected, no one answered his ring.

A neighbor woman, seeing him looking around, volunteered some information about the Volkovs. Through her Curt learned that Ralph Nichols frequently had called there. The woman told of another man also, whom she had seen on many occasions, a tall handsome Russian of thirty-eight or forty. He came from some nearby city, likely Vancouver, the woman said; but she had not seen him since last fall. Yes, he had been a very frequent visitor for a month or more.

The description of this unknown caller sounded to Curt remarkably like a description of Igor Karakhan. His nationality, the time of his visits, and all the other details, fitted Karakhan exactly. But it could not have been him. Neither Sonya nor her father would associate with a person of the Cossack's type.

At four o'clock he met Baldwin on the pier. To his question Baldwin shook his head. "Didn't flush a bally thing. What luck did you have?"

"None." He said nothing about his talk with the woman and Sonya's caller last fall. Baldwin would insist on going back there and running that clue down.

They flew over to Vancouver, completely balked. They had come over in high hopes that morning, never doubting but that they would dig up the truth about Sonya Volkov's trip. But that was still a dark silence.

Curt's time was up. He had to get back to the Lilluars. All day he had ached to know what was happening at the lonely camp on the gravel island. A dozen misfortunes could have struck it—those two 'breeds deserting, LeNoir persuading the Kloshees to a new attack, Sonya making some unexpected move. Paul was standing up alone against all that, and he had one arm in a sling.

The next morning he and Smash started north once more in the Fairchild.

On that long trip up across the latitudes, Baldwin's suggestion in the car the night before haunted him like a nightmare. He fought against it, he hated himself for even entertaining it; but stray thoughts kept getting past his guard, lending the color of truth to that dreadful suggestion.

In the hush of twilight they sailed over a spearhead range and saw the Iskitimwah lake nestling in its mountain cradle. They cut off ignition, made a long fourteen-mile glide, and drifted down upon the water.

Curt's canoe was there near the cabin,

where he had left it. He floated the canoe, shook hands with Smash, gave him final instructions, and set out down the Iskitimwah.

## CHAPTER XI

IT was a little before midnight when he threaded the river delta and pointed his canoe out across the lake toward camp.

After three days of freedom from the bushes and ramhorn bows, he was oppressed by the feeling of danger closing around him again. With Siam-Klallam main band whipping south and LeNoir probably suspecting who Paul and he really were, something drastic was bound to happen, and quickly too. He told himself that this situation had drifted long enough that from now on he was steering it as he wanted it to go. In the morning he would have a stern talk with Sonya, and point out the impossibility of going on or even staying where they were. If she still refused to let him into her secret, he would remind her of her promise to return south; and she tried to break that promise, he'd find her and Ralph back to Russian Lake by force.

The island loomed up ahead, dark and silent. Everything seemed peaceful there. Presently he distinguished the outlines of the two tents. Thank God, nothing had gone very wrong while he'd been away!

From the upper tip of the island a hawk owl's cluck challenged him, so sharp and peremptory that he had to smile. True, Paul to spot any canoe approaching the island!

He answered back, landed at the lower end, beached his canoe and hurried up to camp. Beside the boulder "fort" François and Jocku were rolled up in their eiderdown pokes, sleeping soundly while Paul stood guard. On a spruce mattress under his tent fly Ralph was tossing restlessly in a dream. The Indian, Tenn-Og, was nowhere around.

Beyond the tents Sonya was sitting on her canoe near the water edge, looking out toward the willow island. With a blanket about her shoulders she sat there motionless, lost in thought and totally unaware of him.

"Sonya—"

She sprang up from the canoe and whirled around.

"Oh-oo! Curt! It's you! I wasn't expecting—Curt, where have you been all



these days? Why did you leave us that night?"

"I've been prospecting a creek that old John told me about," he lied, hating the necessity of lying to her. He dropped his light pack and took her hands. "Everything went all right here, didn't it?"

"Yes, but you were gone so long, and Paul wouldn't tell me a thing, and I—I worried about you."

In the ghostly light her face was white and ethereal as she confronted him, and her bosom still was heaving from the start he'd given her. She appeared so afraid and alone that all the stern things he meant to tell her dropped away.

"I worried about you too, dear. Are you glad I'm back?"

"Awfully glad! Paul is dependable, but he's—he's not you."

Her fingers tightened upon his as though asking him not to go away again. Impulsively Curt swept her into his arms, not remembering or caring about that other time at the sentry box.

"Sonya"—his hand caressed her hair, he was flittingly conscious of that small automatic beneath her blouse as he held her close to him—"you seemed so glad—when you saw me. . . . Can't I hope you do care—a little bit, sweetheart?"

Sonya did not look up or answer his question. For a few moments she lay in his arms, not resisting, with the velvety softness of her cheek against his own.

"Sonya, listen," he urged, not knowing how to interpret her passiveness, "I've tried to keep myself from—I know it's wrong to force myself on you—"

She stopped him. "I do like you, Curt. I do—more than you know." But even as she said it, she tried to draw her hand away, and Curt felt her stiffen against him. "Dear, please," she insisted, as his arm tightened about her. "I asked you not to, once."

He allowed her to free herself. When she looked up and saw the bitter disappointment on his face, she kissed his cheek, a brief formal caress which meant no more than her assurance that she forgave his impulsiveness.

"I'm not angry at you, my dear. I'm angry at myself. Two weeks ago I foresaw just this, and still I let you bring me on this trip."

"Sonya, look here," he demanded, "is there somebody else?"

She turned his question aside. "Curt, I wish you didn't idealize me so much. You have, ever since we met. You know so little about the actual *me*. You hardly know anything at all. Our codes are so different—different countries and blood and ways of looking at things—that on some questions we'd be a million miles apart. Something that I consider right in my deepest heart might seem to you an unthinkable wrong."

"Are you meaning this trip of yours?"

She debated a moment. "Yes."

"You're making a mountain out of some molehill. The idea of you doing an 'unthinkable wrong' is ridiculous."

"It's not! I know you and your Canadian sense of decency better than you yourself do."

"My 'Canadian sense of decency'?" he echoed, staring at her. "What do you mean by that?"

"We won't argue it, Curt. You just wouldn't approve, you'd violently disapprove, of my trip."

"But you told Ralph, and he evidently doesn't oppose—"

"Ralph's too gentle to oppose anybody. But you've got a will of your own and opinions of your own. We'd clash. This has to be a matter of my own choice and conscience. Afterward, after it's all over, I'll write you or let you know somehow—I'll answer every question you've ever asked me."

"You say you'll write me—does that mean we're not ending this trip together?"

"Don't try to drive me into a corner, Curt. Please."

"Won't I see you afterward? Can't I come to see you?"

She laughed bitterly. "You may, if you still want to. *But you won't want to.*"

Before he could stop her she turned away from him and disappeared in the darkness toward her tent.

Curt stared after her, torn by the desire to follow and find out what she meant. She seemed to imply that if he knew her better it would smash his idealization.

He thought it ominous that she had not answered his question, "Is it somebody else?"

In a tortured mood he started up the island to join his partner. That ugly suggestion of Arnold Baldwin's was jiggling through his brain again, and for once he could not fight it away.

PAUL came a little way to meet him. "Any luck in Vancouver?" he asked in guarded voice.

"Nothing that I hoped for."

"You still don't know what she's doing in this country?"

"D'you mean you found out something?"

Paul changed the subject abruptly. "Our Indian friend has decamped."

"Tenn-Og? When?"

"Last night. I knew he was going, but I didn't try to stop him. We don't need a prisoner to guard; our party is clumsy enough now."

"So he pitched off! Well, you did the wise thing. Did he steal one of our canoes?"

"No, he swam it. A little matter like a bullet through his shoulder bothered him *point do tout*. He went from the lower end *en bas*, swimming like an otter."

"Hmmp! If he ever gets the chance, I suppose he'll show his gratitude to us by sticking us as full of arrows as a porcupine's got quills. What else happened around here?"

Paul fidgeted and looked out across the dark water. His reluctance and the somber pain on his face struck a chill into Curt. Paul was not one to make a to-do over trifles.

"What's worrying you, Paul? It's something about Sonya, isn't it?"

"I hate to be the one who brings odious news, *compagnon*. You'll think harshly of me for telling it."

"Why, Paul, we've been together too long for that. What is it?"

Paul sidled into his story with slow unwilling steps.

"Sonya was partly the cause of Tenn-Og's going away. On the day after you left she made friends with him, and I knew she had some reason for doing that. Last night, when he left, she sent a message by him. I overheard."

"She sent a message by him?"

"To that 'breed."

"LeNoir?" Curt gasped. "To that fellow! Why Paul, you've—you've made some mistake there!"

"I heard what I heard," Paul insisted. "She had trouble making Tenn-Og understand and she repeated her instructions so many times that I caught every bit of her message. She's meeting LeNoir tonight. Over on the willow island. That's why she's staying awake down there. It's about their

time now; she told the Indian that LeNoir should come when the red star yonder is just setting." Paul pointed at Antares, a degree or two above the horizon.

Curt glanced at the star with unseeing eyes.

"Why's she meeting LeNoir?"

"She's giving him a letter."

"A letter? To whom?"

Paul hesitated, shuddered; but there was no help for it, and he took the step. "It's a letter to Karakhan."

Curt stiffened, like the granite he stood against. Something cold seemed to clutch his heart, cold icy fingers that stopped its beating. He shook Paul roughly by the arm.

"Does she know Karakhan?"

"She knows him very well. God defend me for saying—intimately."

In the queer light Paul saw a gray pallor spread over his partner's face. His bewildered anguish tugged at Paul.

"Forgive me, *compagnon*. But you had to know."

Curt turned slowly and stared down toward the tents as though trying to catch a glimpse of a girlish figure yonder in the darkness. After a time he turned to Paul again. His voice shook.

"Don't make a mistake about this, about her sending a letter to Karakhan. Are you positive of it? Dead positive?"

"To the extent," Paul said quietly, "that I have a copy of the letter itself. Last night I saw her writing in the tent. She was so secret about it that I knew she was writing something important. I watched through one of the arrow holes and saw where she hid the note when she finished; and after she'd gone to sleep, I went in, got it, and made a copy by your electric torch; and then I returned the letter."

"What does it say? What did she tell him?"

Paul reached into his jacket and brought out a paper. "You had best read it yourself."

He gave Curt the pages, and saw his partner stare at them with fascinated dread. Why didn't he snap on the flash and read them? Was he afraid? Was it too much like tempting the thunderbolt?

In the southwestern sky Antares had sunk down till it hovered on the peakline. The moment came when Paul no longer saw it. Time for her meeting with the 'breed, he thought. And that gave him the

idea that if he could only rouse his partner to action, it might bring him out of his stunned bewilderment.

"What are we going to do about this rendezvous?" he asked. "It's our chance to find out where Karakhan is. They're sure to drop a word about his hiding place."

"I suppose we ought to do something," Curt agreed dully. It seemed that locating Karakhan had become of no importance.

Across the channel Paul heard the fluttering call of an owl. It did not fool him.

"There's LeNoir, *compagnon*. Signaling to her. That's the signal he was to use. Aren't we going to shadow them? We'll find out more in ten minutes than we could in a month otherwise."

Curt thrust the letter into his pocket unread. He made a visible effort to get hold of himself. "We ought to follow her. I'll do it. I want to hear what they say. Paul, there's something to this that you didn't get the truth of. There's *got* to be."

The "owl" signaled again. Paul glanced down toward the tents, heard nothing of Sonya, saw nothing of her.

"We'll have to give her a clear road," he suggested, "before she'll cross that channel. Suppose I go down to the tents and make her believe I'm turning in? If she's there by the canoe, I'll step over and talk a minute with her, and drop the remark that you're tired and almost asleep. You can stay here, and when she starts, you can follow. I'll bring you a canoe to cross with."

Curt shook his head. "That 'breed would see a canoe. No, I'll get across. Just leave me your blankets and the flash."

Fifteen minutes dragged by. The "owl" signaled twice more, impatiently. Guessing what Sonya would do before she went across, he pulled the blankets about himself and leaned back against the rocks.

**F**OOTSTEPS came up the landwash presently. They came on till he heard the rustle of a dress. Through eyes narrowed to slits he saw Sonya's faint moon-shadow fall across his feet. She stood there a few seconds, looking at him; then, to make doubly sure, she bent down, so near that he caught the faint odor of thyme from her hair. He sat motionless, feigning that he was oblivious of her when every nerve in him was trembling at her nearness.

She straightened up at last and went back down the landwash. When she was gone Curt took off his jacket and moc-casins, laid his rifle, automatic and flash on top of them, and crept to the water edge. Taking care to make no moon ripples for the sharp eyes of LeNoir to catch, he crawled through the shallows to deep water, struck out for the other island, and landed at its upper tip.

As he turned to look back, a long mottle left the opposite shore and came dancing across the fifty-yard channel. It merged with the shadows of the willows and was swallowed up.

In a kind of daze Curt worked his way down through the shoulder-high brush. He was cold, terribly cold, not from the sharp air or his wet clothes, but from the icy thing at his heart. He seemed to be drawing closer and closer to an abyss, with each step taking him nearer the jumping-off place.

When he heard cautious voices ahead he dropped to hands and knees and crept on. Thirty feet away, he lay down flat and muscled still nearer, foot by foot, till he came up behind a thick clump within twelve feet of Sonya and LeNoir and could hear their words distinctly.

They stood in a little open spot, talking earnestly. They were speaking in French, Sonya in the smooth easy flow of a Parisian, LeNoir in the burry patois of the Canadian Strong-Woods.

"I have never heard of this man you speak about," the 'breed was arguing. "There is no such man in these mountains. For the fifth time, *non!*"

Sonya stamped her small foot impatiently. "For the tenth time, *oui!*" She dropped her imperious tones, became persuasive, coaxing. "I understand how very cautious you must be and how carefully you must guard the secret of his hiding place from all strangers. But we are not strangers, he and I, Baptiste. Will you not believe that he and I are fellow-countrymen and—and *amis intimes*? Has he not mentioned me a dozen times to you?"

"He has not mentioned you once," LeNoir came back quickly, *too* quickly.

"*Allons donc!*" Sonya caught him up. "You have made the admission of knowing him! Now perhaps we can talk!"

The detective in Curt admired the deft way she had led LeNoir into her trap. It was clear that Karakhan did not know she



was coming to him. That was a strange revelation. It meant that Karakhan had not sent for her at all. That there *was* something here which Paul hadn't found out.

The 'breed growled a *s'pristi* at being trapped into admitting that he knew Karakhan.

"What is it that you want?" he demanded.

"For you to take him this letter. Only that. When he reads my note he will give you more money for bringing it than for all the help that you've been to him since last fall."

At the mention of money LeNoir pricked up his ears. But still he hung back warily.

"What more do you want of me?"

"Nothing more. You see, I am not asking you where he is, or endangering his security in any way. From my letter he will understand everything. The rest lies in his hands. He will relieve you of all responsibility. Take your directions from him. He will send you back here, undoubtedly, to get me."

The 'breed jumped as the situation dawned on him. "*Sacrebleu!* Is it that you are going to join him there?"

"You are not entirely without understanding," Sonya answered. "Yes, I am joining him there—and remaining."

Behind the screen of willows Curt rose on his elbow, and a cry choked in his throat. "And remaining"—those two shameless words of hers stabbed him like a knife. *She was joining Karakhan in his wilderness refuge!* Sonya, his Sonya, going to the Cossack, to live with him, his mistress.

"I'll be waiting for your return," Sonya continued, to the 'breed. "Each night when the red star sets I'll listen for your signal. Now, one other thing. These Indians are planning to attack my party. You have influence with them. You must keep them from doing that."

"I have little influence," the 'breed evaded. "But perhaps I can do something."

"You must," she insisted. "And now I'll go back to camp. Those two yonder may discover I am gone."

The 'breed detained her. "Will you say nothing," he stammered, "about—at Russian Lake, when I came over to the island . . . You will say nothing to M'sieu Karakhan about that little indiscretion?"

"Nothing at all," Sonya promised.

A few final instructions from her and grunts of assent from the 'breed, and the brief meeting ended. Sonya floated her canoe and crossed to camp. LeNoir walked back through the willows to his own craft and vanished toward the mainland shore.

After they had both gone, Curt got up shaky and cold, with that terrible coldness which had come over him when he first heard Paul's report. As he stared at the dark channel which had swallowed her canoe, all his previous questions about her trip, all the puzzling aspects of it which had so baffled him, became brutally clear. In Victoria she had known Karakhan, had fallen under the spell of his magnetic personality, as Helen Mathieson and a cohort of others had done. And after his disappearance she had started searching for him to be with him again.

Somehow she had found out in a general way where he was hiding, and had persuaded Ralph to come north with her. The pretense of the biology work, her passionate determination in the face of every danger, her secrecy, defended so tightly—all that was clear enough to him now. He understood, too, why she had stayed him off. And her mention of his "Canadian sense of decency"; and her bitter words about him not wanting to see her afterward, it was all clear, pitilessly clear.

Stumbling through the brush to the island tip, he swam back across the channel, took off his clothes and wrung them out and dressed again. He fumbled in his pocket and got out Paul's copy of Sonya's letter. He still dreaded to read it, but now he was driven to. In spite of what he had heard, his hope in her integrity still flickered. She might have lied to the 'breed. Her letter might throw some new light on her relations with Karakhan. It might completely absolve her.

HE made a fold of a blanket to hide the glare of his flash, and laid the letter inside. Except for the salutation and a few stray words, it was all in French, the courtly French of one educated Russian to another.

LOUBEMETZ MOY:

I know what a shock of surprise this will give you—to learn I am seeking you and am so near. Please, please don't become instantly angry, I have not endangered you by this trip. In everything I have said and done I have taken the utmost care to guard your

safety. I had to come, as one must breathe to live. Why did you go away so suddenly, without a word to me or even a hint of where we might later be together again? Days and weeks with no message from you—I nearly came to think that you had forgotten your "*ptite puritaine*"; but I would not allow myself to believe that. Oh, it was lonely in Victoria, with you gone, with Carl and Father gone so long to Vladivostok. Your sharp disappearance was an awakening for me of what I had lost when you went. I knew you would have taken me with you had it been possible, and for a time I lived upon the hope that you might be able to send me word of where you were; but when the slow weeks passed and no word came, my work dropped from my hands and I began searching for you. I would have come to you even if the path led back across all the horrors of those earlier years.

You are demanding to know how I found out where you went. It was a task of black discouragement. No one else, certainly none of those stupid Police, could ever have followed your trail, but I knew you were acquainted with Jim Gunnar, who is dead now and his lips sealed; and he told me, guardedly, that you were hiding somewhere in the Lilluars. It was my intention to make friends with the Kloshees and find you through them, but then I took the notion that Le-Noir was in your service, and the guess proved right.

For the rest, this LeNoir will tell you of the party I am with and my situation. I have arranged to meet him and he will bring me to you. . . .

When Paul lay down in his tent that night, he intended to go back out and join his partner as soon as Curt returned from the willow island. But two days and nights of guarding the camp all alone had tired him more than he realized, and he dropped off to sleep in spite of himself.

It was long after sunrise the next morning when he woke up. His first thought was of Curt. He had just been dreaming of his partner, a peculiarly haunting dream. He and Curt were trailing Karakhan through a woods, a dark forest where the flowers were black and the trees were dead things and the birds were silent spectral creatures. Just as they were closing in on Karakhan, Curt was shot down by a fluted arrow from ambush, and the Cossack got away from them in a ghostly canoe that took to the air. . . .

He stepped outside the tent and looked around. On the other side of the boulders, François and Jocku sat off by themselves, smoking stolidly. Sonya had breakfast almost ready, and Ralph was trying to help her. The camp scene was peaceful and ordinary, as on a dozen other mornings,

with no suggestion of treachery abroad; but its peacefulness was ghastly to Paul, knowing as he did that one member of the party was on her way to join Karakhan, and last night had connived with the vicious 'breed who had tried three times to kill Curt and himself.

Curt was not about. His canoe also was gone. Somewhat alarmed, Paul took the binoculars and swept the lake. On a pine island near the Iskitimwah mouth he saw Curt's canoe upturned on the landwash. He understood. Curt had gone off to himself. Sick at heart, he was over there alone, fighting it out, getting a grip on himself before he faced her again.

Sonya came over to the tent, bareheaded in the slant morning sun. In her gaze Paul saw no trace of guilt or shame, only a comradely friendship as she smiled good morning.

"Paul, where's Curt?"

Paul steeled himself against her witchery. She seemed too splendid a girl to write that letter to Karakhan, and to betray men who had been her loyal friends; but he knew what he knew.

"He'll be back after a while, I suppose."

Sonya's eyes opened wider at his sharp tone.

"Did you sleep well last night, Paul?" she asked casually.

Paul smiled grimly to himself. It was an innocent-seeming question. She appeared to be laying his humor to a restless night.

"I slept very well," he answered her, as poker-faced as she. "One does, after two nights awake."

"Won't you come and have breakfast?" she invited. His unfriendliness hurt her, and she tried to be nice to him. "It's ready now."

"Thanks," Paul refused. He felt that he could eat no breakfast that she had prepared. Not after what she had done to his partner. "When I want breakfast, I'll get it."

"Why Paul!" she exclaimed, surprised and wounded at his rebuff. "What's the matter?"

Paul took a pleasure in turning on his heel and walking away. She deserved, he thought, to do some worrying about how much he *knew*.

Getting Curt's rod and tackle, he paddled north to a rocky headland and killed three hours by pretending to fish in the swirling shallows.

Occasionally he glanced down toward the Iskitimwah mouth, but saw nothing of his partner. A little before noon he could stand it no longer. Dropping down lake, he landed and walked back into the pines.

CURT was sitting against a boulder, tracing meaningless patterns on the wolf-foot with a stick. He was plunged into deep thought, motionless, a dead pipe in his teeth. His face was gray and haggard, his eyes had a hard light in them; and when he looked up and smiled, it was a bitterly cynical smile. He no longer seemed confused and bewildered, as last night at the sentry rocks. During the rest of that black night and lonely morning he had fought it out. He was facing the ugly facts and adjusting himself to them. His idealization of Sonya Volkov had been dynamited, and he had set himself, with no compromise, to wash her out of his heart.

In a dank spot at one side of the boulder stood a cluster of queer flowers. Paul jerked as his eyes fell upon them. Name of the Name!—they were black flowers, the black blossoms in the spectral forest of his dream.

"What's the matter?" Curt asked. "Seeing a ghost?" He turned and looked. "Oh, those. I suppose they are a bit uncanny the first time you see 'em."

"But—but *fleurs noires*—what are they?"

"Black lilies. The black Russian lily."

Paul shuddered. "They're *supernaturel*! They belong with the dead!"

"You're right about that; the people responsible for 'em being here are dead. The Cossack *promyshleniki* brought 'em across from Kamchatka a hundred and fifty years ago. Since then they've run wild and spread all over the country to the Rocky water-shed."

Paul stared at the cluster. He was not superstitious, but those black flowers, so like the ones in the spectral forest, affected him powerfully. A part of his sinister dream had already materialized. The rest of that dream—Curt stricken with an arrow, Karakhan escaping in a ghostly canoe—he had a presentiment that it too would come to pass.

Curt pointed with the stick. "See that pair of 'em there, nodding their heads together? The smaller one is Sonya Volkov, and the other is her Cossack. I'm going to pull Karakhan's head off in a minute. I'll

take the blossom over and give it to her. "De and then, after we nail him, I'll tell her The what I meant by it."

"Nail him"? You're still going ahead and w with this hunt?"

"Why not? We started it, we'll see the through with it."

He got up, put on his jacket, and plucked the taller of the two black lilies. Over the other one he hesitated a moment. A shadow went through him as he took hold of it. "W But then with a savage gesture he jerked it up by the roots and flung it away, and devil brushed his hands.

"How're you going to find him?" Paul queried. "LeNoir is suspicious of us. The breed won't ever let us shadow him now."

"We won't try to shadow LeNoir. We've got an easier way of finding Karakhan. Sonya Volkov has been hard luck for us good far, but we're going to turn her into good luck. We'll use her. It's only fair; she's used us."

"Use her?—?"

"Well, she's going to him, isn't she? What's to prevent you and me from following her? She'll be a dozen times easier to shadow than that bush-slinker. When she goes to join him, we'll go along; and when she gets there, we'll be there too!"

## CHAPTER XII

AFTER a day and night of hard travel for him, LeNoir stood in Karakhan's cabin once again. "Dis is your," he said, and with no other explanation handed over Sonya's letter.

"Mine?" Karakhan echoed. "It's for me, you say?" His face turned ashy. "Who knows I'm here? Who in hell pumped that me out of you?"

LeNoir trembled. "Read heem," he urged. "You understand, den."

His eyes went to the table behind Karakhan where lay his chief's heavy automatic. He backed up a step, and his fingers closed over an iron-tipped ski staff leaning against the wall. If this girl was no friend of his chief's but an enemy who was playing some infinitely clever game, Karakhan might shoot him in his tracks.

Karakhan ripped the envelope and took out the letter. In bewilderment he scanned the first few lines, then whipped over to the last page and glanced at the signature to see who his correspondent was.

"*Gospodiel Sonya Volkov!*"



"Den you know her? She no lie to me?" The question went past the Russian unheeded—he had turned back to the first page and was reading the letter with a gripped attentiveness that shut out everything except the words before him.

With a feverish light in his eyes he read the letter a second time, read sentences of it a third time. When he did look up, all his usual *sang-froid* had fallen from him.

"Where is she, LeNoir?" The pages quivered in his unsteady hands. "Why the devil didn't you bring her along with you, man?"

LeNoir drew a breath of immense relief. The girl *had* spoken the truth! She really *was* *amie de liaison* with his chief.

"She down der at dat camp wit' de handers," he explained. Thinking this a good chance to impress Karakhan with his precaution, he added: "How I know wedder she talkit straight or not? I don't know she aw-right, ontill you say. Me, I don't tell nobody w're you hide, and I don't breeng no strangers here."

"But you should—No, I suppose you did do right, since you didn't know the—uh, circumstances. Sit down. I'll get some coffee for us."

As LeNoir eased onto the wall bench his glance strayed out the window to the landwash where half a dozen lean honey-colored huskies were nosing along the water edge for dead fish. A pistol shot east of the hangar fourteen birchbark canoes lay side by side on the sand like basking seals; and when the timber just behind them smoke was rising from three big campfires. The party was the Black Grizzly and his men, on their way south. They had made a hasty meal of scorched fish and bracken bulbs cooked in the coals, and were wrapped up in their bighorn robes, stiff as a footsore pack of wolves after a long chase. They had come a hundred miles without stopping even for food, and another hundred lay ahead of them.

The sight of them comforted LeNoir a lot, after his two dismal failures to wipe out Ralston's party. He certainly could use thirty more men on the job. One swoop and smash, and the business would be done.

The Russian came out of the boarded-off kitchen with a pot of coffee. He poured two tins. LeNoir drained his cup at a gulp. Slowly sipping his, Karakhan listened while the 'breed told him of the happenings down river.

About the two suspicious strangers who were drawing closer and closer to his hiding, the Russian asked no questions just then. He was unable to focus his thoughts on that pair—the sentences of Sonya Volkov's letter were galloping too madly through his mind, and his emotions were too much in a turmoil over her. She was near him, within a hundred miles! In five or six days more she would be there with him!

LeNoir suggested carefully, "She tell me dat you be veree 'blige' for me breeng you dis letter and you pay me somet'ing, mebbe." He thought it good policy to mention the money matter while his chief was still in the first flush of elation and more likely to be generous.

Karakhan took out a billfold, selected a yellow note and passed it over. LeNoir blinked his eyes as he saw the denomination—two o's trailing a 5. His chief had always paid him very handsomely, but half a thousand dollars, for one trip—the girl's letter must have hit Karakhan hard!

"There'll be others like that," his chief assured, "when you bring her here to me. Several others. You'd better get some sleep now. Siam-Klale's outfit got in just a little while ago and they won't be ready to start on till nearly noon. I'll wake you when they begin stirring."

After the 'breed had gone to sleep, Karakhan left the cabin and walked down the lake shore, unconsciously seeking the open where walls did not limit his mood. For the first time in many dreary moons he appreciated the freedom of his mountain-cradled home. Yesterday the months until fall had seemed an endless stretch, but not now, not when he had the prospect of Sonya Volkov living there with him through the wilderness summer.

He could hardly yet believe his good fortune. He had never dreamed she was searching for him or even that she liked him well enough to join him. She had proved the most elusive creature of his wide experience. At times he had even been a little afraid of her—afraid of those clear steady eyes that seemed to read him through and through and hold a scorn of him in their inscrutable depths. And now she was actually coming to him, his *p'tite puritaine!*

A mile down the lakeshore he came to a small cove, screened by sweeping pines—a beautiful little retreat with its tinkle of

water and scent of cloudberry blossoms. In the back of his mind he was imagining Sonya Volkov there with him in that seclusion; but his thoughts were gradually sobering, for those two suspicious strangers kept intruding, a jarring discord in his fancies.

HE knew now that they were not prospectors, whatever else they might be. Gold hunters would hardly have disregarded that warning at the pass; and after that night attack they would certainly have got out of the country as fast as a canoe could take them. A small voice whispered that this Ralston was one of those damnable Mounted, who had struck his trail somehow and was sticking to it like a human bloodhound.

It put him in a dilemma. He was in danger and ought to escape. Though LeNoir had thirty-some men now and stood every chance in the world of wiping that party out, still something might slip up and those two might bore on through to his refuge. By all the rules of caution he ought to go. But to leave just when Sonya Volkov was on the way to him and he had the prospects of having her there during the soft summer moons . . . For once he could not make a clean-cut decision.

Suppose, he reasoned, that he let LeNoir go south with the main band of Kloshees and spring his attack. The 'breed could send back runners and keep him constantly informed of what was happening. If Ralston was killed and all danger from him was ended, well and good; he would stay there and wait for Sonya. But if Ralston was not killed, he would escape. There would still be time. That plane in the hangar was an ace up the sleeve. It gave one an almost magical power of vanishing.

It bothered him more than a little to think that he might have to leave Sonya in the lurch. She was his countrywoman, he looked on her as his; and it would go against the grain to know, later, that a bush-sneak 'breed or an Indian had dragged her down to their level. But he had long since passed the point of allowing any weak scruples to stop him.

At noon, when the Kloshees began waking up, he went in and roused LeNoir.

"You go back south with Siam-Klale," he directed, "and hook up with those eight others. Your first move will be to get Miss Volkov away from that party, so she won't be exposed to any danger. Then choose

your time and place, and finish this business off. Don't try to ambush or ougth those two. When you've got an advance of eighteen-to-one odds you ought to do it by making a head-on attack. It may be eight or ten men, but we'll let the Kloshees do the worrying about that."

The 'breed nodded. He was not foolishly confident, he knew what a terrible fight Ralston and his partner would be up; but they were only two men, against three dozen. The others did not count. Nichols was a raw cheechako, and the two *métis* would not be worth a whit of damn in a show-down fight.

"Don't run any risk yourself," the Northsian cautioned him—needlessly. "You won't have to. Let the Kloshees do it. Now, just one other point. If anything goes wrong, I mean if you don't get those two at your first smash, fire a round at me at once. I want to know about it. I'll come down there and help you. You'll do that, now?"

LeNoir thought it odd that his chief, who always before had kept strictly away from danger, should want to get into this fight personally. But he promised to send word.

They walked outside to the Kloshees' camp where the men were getting ready to shove away. A silent tight-lipped band of men were going about their little war without ceremony or *fol-de-rol*. Even to Kamikhan, who was heartily tired of them, they were an admirable body of men.

The little flotilla pushed off and started east along the shore.

## CHAPTER XIII

CURT looked up from cleaning his rifle. "You saw some caribou, y'do you say?" he asked of Jocku, who stood in front of him with gun and canoe paddle. "Where?"

Jocku pointed down lake at a birch not land, barely visible in the twilight. "Sex dat'n. François and me, 'bout ten minutes ago, we saw 'em edge out to drink and then tromp back into de bush."

The trip seemed safe enough to Curca. There couldn't be any Indians on that land or the skittish animals would have stampeded away from it and swum to the mainland. And his party did need meat.

"All right, go ahead, you and François," he consented. "But don't stay down the hill."

to let dark catch you, or these Klosehees might shoot out canoes and cut you off." The two *métis* promised him and hurried away. Curt was glad to see them go. Mayver since his party had broken camp at Klosehe Iskitimwah mouth and come on north, they had lived in a nervous funk. A bit of hunting would do them good.

When he had finished with his rifle, Curt began loading extra magazine clips, to be ready if something unexpected burst on them and Paul before morning. From signs which they had noticed that day he believed that Siam-Klale's main band had arrived and was camping over on the Northwest shore. LeNoir had probably got back too. If so, the stage was all set for a double, a whole barrel of it. The camp was entirely safe at present; as long as Sonya was with the party LeNoir would hold off, for a fight would expose her to danger. But as soon as he got her away, the breed was going to touch off the avalanche.

"He'll get a damned bad disappointment!" Curt was thinking grimly. "When this avalanche piles down we're going to be *elsewhere!*" The moment Sonya went he intended to start François and Jocku back to mouth and send Ralph along with them. That would free himself and Paul. Taking nothing but rifles and light canoe, they would slip away from the island and be gone when the breed and his outfit came calling. Up the Lilluar they would watch for Sonya to pass, then fall in behind her party and let her lead them to Karakhan.

In the tent Sonya was putting together a few personal articles for her trip, fully expecting LeNoir to come and take her away that midnight. The darkness settling down, the daunting journey ahead and the terrible uncertainty at the end of it, filled her with dread. After all, she was but a girl, embarking on a venture that was not only dangerous but unnatural to her (sex).

The safety of the party after she left worried her only a little; she had an implicit faith that Curt and Paul could take care of themselves. They would get back to safety and get Ralph back. But herself—what lay at trail-end for her? Would Curt ever know? Or try to find out? Or care?

She longed to step outside and talk with him, a few last words; but she was afraid

to, afraid he would cut her cold as he had been doing for the last four days. She was utterly bewildered by his attitude, his icy exaggerated politeness, his sudden and complete change toward her.

She could not fathom the cause of his change. It couldn't be that he knew anything about her rendezvous with LeNoir; she herself had seen him leaning against the rocks asleep, and Paul had been in his tent both before and after she went. And it couldn't be that Ralph had told him about her trip. Ralph protested earnestly that he had never dropped a hint nor had Curt questioned him.

Whatever the reason, she felt that she had lost her best friend on earth, the one person whom she might have depended on to help her.

When her light pack was made up, she buckled it, laid it aside and stepped over to the tent door. Curt was almost done with the clips. In a minute or two he'd go up and join Paul, and she wouldn't get to see him again alone. For a few moments she wavered, torn between her pride and the promptings of her heart. When she thought of his pleading "Can't I hope you do care—a little bit, sweetheart," it seemed impossible that he cared nothing at all now. She put her pride in her pocket and went out to him.

"Can't I help you with those cartridges?" she proffered, as an excuse to linger and talk.

"Very kind of you," Curt refused coldly, "but if you haven't done this before, you might load 'em backwards."

Sonya wondered what he meant by that. His words carried some barbed meaning, just as he had meant something stinging when he brought her that black lily at the Iskitimwah camp.

"But won't you show me how?" she offered again, almost humbly. "I'd try to do it right."

"I've only a few more, thanks. You needn't bother."

"Curt," she asked, with a sudden impulse, "what's made you change so toward me?"

"Change? Have I?"

"Please, Curt, let's not—you know as well as I do that you've changed."

He laid a filled clip on his hat-brim. "I believe you asked me on two occasions to restrain myself. Are you objecting now when I'm doing what you asked?"



"You're not being fair, Curt! I didn't say we shouldn't be good friends. In fact, I—I wanted—"

"Friends—exactly!" His tones were sharp-edged. "Just so far and no farther, that's what you wanted. Just as far as it suited your convenience. But men, my dear, that is, men of self-respect, don't care to be treated like tethered bears on a chain."

"Curt, that's unjust! I acted as I did out of consideration for you. Don't you believe that, Curt?"

"If you say so." In a moment he added, more sincerely: "To be honest, I do believe it. You knew that you could be only a friend, so you shot square and plainly told me—"

"Curt," she forced herself to interrupt, "I went to extremes, as usual, on those 'two occasions.' I thought I was doing right, acting honestly; but everything was so chaotic with me that I wasn't sure of anything at all. And Curt, you should remember that I'd known you only a very, very short time, not long enough to—to realize that I—that we *could* be more than friends."

Curt looked up from his half-filled clip and glanced at her sharply, altogether puzzled by her confession. He could not believe she was speaking honestly. That letter of hers to Karakhan left no possible doubt where her heart and passion lay. Then why was she telling him this?

Sonya waited, waited for him to make at least some comment; but when she saw he would not, she flung away her last rag of pride: "I didn't really mean what I said about your Canadian sense of decency that night, Curt. You didn't deserve that. And I did hope we'd keep in touch. I intended to let you know where I was, and I hoped you would understand my trip, and not judge too harshly, and that I'd—I'd see you again."

Curt wondered why she wanted to keep in touch. An explanation, the only possible one, struck him. Did she believe that he might be of help to her and her Cosack when the time came for them to get out of the Lilluars? Was she planning to use him, as she had used Ralph?

The very thought infuriated him.

"I don't see the need of digging up these old bones," he cut her short. "If I bothered you with my attentions, that's ancient history. I'll go and help Paul now, if you don't mind."

HE stood up and gave her his hand. As his glance met hers he'd seen tears in her eyes, saw her lips tremble. "All right, Curt," she said quietly, with a humility that shamed him. She glided down at the ground, started to say "For one thing more, checked herself and tucked away to her tent.

He thrust the clips into his pocket and walked up to the little stone fort where Paul had rolled together. Paul was fully inspecting it and plugging chimney that no arrows could sift through. Two sentries did not count on having to use the "Y" fence; but their situation was delicate. Le Noir was a crafty fellow, and it was necessary to guard against the unforeseen.

The little island was almost a repetition of the Iskitimwah camp except that it was smaller and had no neighboring islets visible in rifle shot.

At the upper tip of the island Ralph had been sitting at the water edge occasionally doing in a fish on the hand-line he was handling. He looked lonely and disconsolate. Curt wondered whether Sonya had repeated told him the truth about her trip.

As he brought Paul an extra rock he was startled by the low quavering call of an owl six hundred yards out upon the lagoon. He dropped the rock, stood listening. Was it Le Noir? It couldn't be; the red star was nearly two hours high. But then the call came again, no nearer but louder.

"Hell! It is LeNoir, Paul! He's coming early for her."

Paul nodded. "Yes, it's he. Siam-Klee and he must want to get the whole honouress over with tonight!"

They crouched down behind the rock and waited.

She stepped outside the tent and looked around cautiously to see where Paul and he were, and then hurried on down the island. In the dusk her slender form grew fainter and fainter till Curt no longer saw her. A canoe grated on the pea-gravel of the beach as she tugged at the craft to get it afloat. The dark blur moved away from shore. Curt covered his face with his hands to shut out the sight of it. When he looked up again the blur was gone.

PAUL touched his arm, moments afterward.

"We'd better be somewhere else in an hour from now. This island is going to have visitors."

Curts pulled himself together. "Yes, but he'd better go," he said jerkily. "We'll remember what we need of our outfit and get away, way to one of these other islands, and then we'll glait up."

Paul says: "François and Jocku haven't come and tuck."

Curts turned toward the caribou island, conspicuously visible in the deep dusk. It just then occurred to him that he had not heard the *metis* shoot. Their silence was strange; perhaps they had been gone long enough to make two such trips.

"I'll drop down and get 'em, Paul. While I'm doing that, you be throwing our things together."

He hurried to the lower end, launched the remaining canoe and darted down lake. At a few rods offshore he called in a guarded voice:

"Jocku! You and François get out of the sphere. Come alive! We haven't any time to waste."

No answer came back. Angry at their insolent pokiness when minutes were so precious, he skirled closer in and called again.

His voice sent the little band of caribou rearing through the swamp birch to the farther side of the island, but neither François nor Jocku answered.

The explanation dawned on him with a crash. He remembered, too late, that the *metis* had sat off by themselves all day, talking in low tones; and that Jocku had acted queerly when he came to make his request. At the time, with other worries upon his mind, he had thought little about it, but now he saw through the whole ruse. Their trips after a caribou had been a scheme to secure a canoe and get away. *Those two had deserted!*

He whirled the canoe around and started back to camp, swearing at the evil luck that dogged every step he took. The treachery of those 'breeds was little short of disaster. He had counted heavily on them to take Ralph back south; and now they had sneaked away. If he and Paul were encumbered with Ralph on their swift shadowy trip, they would not stand a ghost of a chance.

Before he had gone very far he heard a rifle shot down stream. He stopped short, listened. A mile south, down where the river narrowed to a bottle neck, a flurry of shots sounded. The dull *kroom* of the guns was unmistakable — the heavy bear

Winchesters of Jocku and François. Those two guides had run into an ambush.

One of the Winchesters suddenly stopped *krooming*. The other shot four times more. Then, faintly in the taut silence, a long-drawn yell wafted up river, more a scream than any articulate word. Piercing, vibrant with terror, it sent shivers through Curts. It was a man's death cry.

He listened a minute longer but heard nothing more. It was over, the tragedy down that dark river.

All his anger changed to heartfelt pity. "Poor devils!" he said softly. "They got it. The Klososhees had a party at that narrows, to cut us off if we tried to break away." He had meant to warn those two about that bottle neck, but they had given him no chance.

He whipped on ashore, goaded by the memory of that cry. Paul had heard it too, and knew what it meant. Working swiftly, they made ready to leave. They left the tents standing, abandoned most of the supplies and all the heavier things; took nothing but guns, blankets and food for a few days.

"Carry this stuff to the canoe," Curts directed. "I'll go get Ralph."

As he hurried up the island, he tried to figure how he might salvage something out of the wreckage of his plans. Perhaps they could take Ralph several miles up some tributary river where the Klososhees were not likely to come, and secrete him in some cave, with food and camp necessities, to be picked up later when they had finished with Karakhan. It was possible.

He did not pause to think out the details. Before everything else, they had to get away from this island. Sonya was gone; they were wide open to attack.

"Ralph! Come along with me. We're pitching away from this place on the jump."

Ralph got up quickly. "Why, what's the matter?"

"I'll tell you later. Let's get into the canoe and put distance behind us."

"Where's Sonya?" Ralph queried, winding up his fish line.

"Don't ask questions now, man, for Lord's sake! And let that line go. Come on, we're leaving here—"

HE bit the sentence off. Out upon the lake to the west a "merganser" called. From north and south came an-

## Flinging themselves behind the rock



"Look north!" Paul cried. "Keep those back. I'll handle these."

For the first time Curt noticed that three canoes were skirling in toward the upper tip. He cut down on them. The range was so long that he had little hope of stopping the three or of doing much damage. At his first shot a figure rose up in the leading canoe and shouted a command. The voice sounded to him like Tenn-Og's, and the dim figure, too, looked like that of the Indian they had saved.

"Damn you!"—the thought flashed through his mind—"we patched you up and treated you white, when your buddies ran away and left you; and now you're leading men to spear us. I'll get *you* anyway!" He poured a whole clip of vengeful bullets at the figure, then jerked his gun down and peered through the dimness. The Klososhee still stood up, waving his arms and shouting orders. The other two craft stopped and began milling about uncertainly. As Curt snapped in another clip, swearing savagely at missing Tenn-Og, all three of the canoes veered around and skimmed back out of sight.

Their sudden flight astonished him; he had hit nobody, done no damage that he could see.

He laid it to cowardice, and whirled to help Paul again.

Of the five canoes to the west, Paul had collapsed one, knocked a man out of a second and sent it drifting helplessly, and had sunk a third in the shallows. Together he and Curt ran a burst at the other two. They sank both of them in the space of five seconds, but the men jumped out into the water, sprang ashore and joined their confederates.

**G**RABBING their automatics, Curt and Paul tensed themselves for the hand-to-hand fight.

"Keep down!" Curt snapped, as Paul rose up to see better. "Don't expose yourself. We've got a chance to win this. Part of those canoes turned tail completely. There couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen men get ashore. We've knocked the confidence out of 'em, and that's half of it."

The arrows dwindled and stopped. A dead silence fell. It lengthened to five minutes.

"What do you make of it?" Paul whispered.

"I don't know. Maybe they're pulling themselves together for the rush. They're up to something."

"Is Ralph—is he gone?"

"I can't say. He's hard hit. You keep watch while I see if I can do anything."

He bent down beside Nichols again and tried to rouse some sign of life. Ralph still lay motionless, limp and stricken. Making a pillow of his jacket, he slipped it under Ralph's head, and wiped away the trickle of scarlet from his mouth. It was all he could do. He straightened up to help Paul watch.

"Seen anything of 'em?"

"Not a glimpse. I heard a noise down near the tents but saw nothing."

Curt sprang over the barricade, secured Ralph's two guns and cartridges, came back, waited.

The taut silence became more and more puzzling to him. If the Klososhees had been unnerved by the rifle fire and were afraid to attack, why were they lingering down there by the tents? Why weren't they leaving the island? They were taking a mysteriously long time to make up their minds what to do.

When the deadlock did break, it broke suddenly. Down at the lower tip, the canoes which had reached shore all at once went darting out through the shallows—escaping. Launched on the run, they were out upon the open lake and disappearing at top speed before Curt and Paul could realize what was taking place.

They stared at each other in amazement.

"They're gone!" Paul gasped "*Gone!* They hadn't the nerve for a finish fight!"

Curt was more skeptical. He simply could not believe it. "Maybe they're gone. This thing has got the earmarks of a trap, to me."

"But we saw them go."

"Maybe part of those men are still down there, waiting for us."

"But no! At least four of those canoes carried three men apiece."

A suspicion of the truth struck Curt.

"How many canoes did you see?"

"Six."

"That's what I counted. Only five boats reached shore. Where'd they get that *extra canoe?*"

Paul turned a thunderstruck face to him. "You mean—?"

"That's what they've done,"

They left the barricade and hurried down to the camp site. Curt's heart sank as he glanced about. All their supplies had been destroyed; the sleeping pokes and two food packs which Paul had got ready had been slashed or thrown into the water; and the two tents had been ripped to ribbons.

With Paul at his heels he turned and ran out to where they had abandoned their canoe. It was not there. They scoured the whole lower end of the island. The craft was gone. The Kloshees had taken it.

It was the loss of their canoe that really frightened them. Food, supplies, tents—those were not matters of life or death. But with a mile of water all around them and no craft to get away in, they were helpless prisoners on that bare strip of sand and boulders.

#### CHAPTER XIV

IN front of the tents Paul hunted around and found one of the pine knots which they had used for starting fires quickly. Over in the barricade Curt lit it with a double match, wedged the taper between two rocks, and bent over Ralph's crumpled form.

Ralph was alive but that was all. The crashing blow to his head when he fell against the rock had plunged him into a profound collapse which pointed to a very bad concussion. The arrow in his back looked to Curt like a fatal wound in itself. Under a surgeon's care at a hospital Ralph might have stood a chance; but he was hundreds of miles from any help, and worst of all they were imprisoned indefinitely on that bare little island.

Curt's hand shook and his eyes grew misty as he worked with his stricken friend. He decided to cut off the shaft of the arrow and let the rest remain, for he could never extract the dart without starting an internal bleeding that would speedily be fatal. With what they could salvage from their slashed blankets and sleeping pokes, they made him a pallet, and covered him with their jackets. That was all they could do for him.

The remainder of the short night passed quietly. Several times Curt heard signal calls drifting across the lake, but he did not even bother to keep a lookout, for he knew they would not be molested. The Kloshees would sit around on those neigh-

boring islands like wolves around a stricken creature that was still dangerous; all they would wait and wait till starvation and exposure had done the work for them.

His thoughts of Sonya were bitter thoughts, not so much because of the suffering she had brought him as what she had done to Ralph. Asking nothing, driving no bargain, Nichols had been her faithful friend. With no thought of self he had accompanied her on her trip, helping her, he could; and then, without scruple, she had abandoned him when she considered her convenience. Now, as the thought of his quiet heroism, he lay there unconscious, slipping nearer and nearer the death—and she on her way to the Cossack.

When morning came and the sun began beating down hotly, they patched strips of canvas together and managed to rig up a shelter for Ralph. He was hanging self, surprisingly to his slender remnant of life. To sit there in terrible helplessness and to watch his life ebb away when he might have a chance to live was the most maddening experience that Curt had ever undergone.

At a creek mouth on the mainland showed a wisp of smoke stood up above the trees from the central camp. Canoes came and went freely across the water. Once, when one of them came dancing past six hundred yards away, Paul seized his rifle in a fury. He screwed up the sight on the long-range Savage, sank the craft with his ricocheting bullets, and sent its three occupants swimming for the nearest island. After that the canoes kept a respectful distance.

The noonday sun was a torture. It beamed down on the rocks and sand like the glare from a furnace door. There was not a square inch of shade on the island, not a breath of air stirring. Their only relief was to immerse themselves repeatedly in the shallows and sprinkle water around the shelter where Ralph lay.

In the mid-afternoon the sultry rain broke, with all the suddenness of mountain weather. A heavy thunderstorm gathered in the west, swept out from behind the ranges; and for two hours the little island was deluged with rain and lashed by sheets of hail. Working in the downpour, Curt and Paul dug ditches around the barricade to lead off the water, and weighted the canvas with rocks to keep Ralph sheltered. When the rain had swept on east, the westerly breeze poured down from glacier,

stricken snowy slopes, and woke the lake to us; and appalling whitecaps. The temperature and dummed. From the blistering sultry heat which had prepared the thunder-bittern, the weather turned to a sharp cold with a raw penetrating wind. They were wet, she bailed to the bone, and gnawed with hunger—while yonder on the islands the faithfuls waited patiently.

he he Toward evening Curt walked off by himself, to look at their plight with steady eyes and see if he could think of any plan when escape. As he thought of the cold night the morning, of the sweltering heat again to-morrow and of hunger gradually dragging the dam and Paul down, he felt he would rather die that evening, in a desperate bid to begin freedom, than wait there through the long hours of several days and nights.

right Over and over again he swore to himself, "I'm going to get off this island!" If of life could not walk or fly or paddle away, he would at least could swim away. But they could not abandon Ralph. To take Ralph with them they would have to get a boat; and the only chance of doing that was for one of them to swim over to the mainland

and show camp after dark and try to steal a canoe. He himself would have to go. Paul could not; like most men born beside the cold waters of the North, he could hardly swim under all.

a fur. He walked back to his partner, who was gathering bits of drift to make a fire for Ralph; and outlined his plan.

swim "Besides our own lives," he added, "there's Ralph to be considered. If we have a canoe, we can drop down to the Iskitim-beawah mouth in twenty-four hours, and in six more we'll be up at old John's lake. If not Smash is waiting there, as he ought to be, not we can have Ralph over on the Pacific Coast, in the hospital at Prince Rupert, in thirty-six hours."

and the Paul glanced across that mile of icy slapping water. "You'd stand one chance in twenty-five of getting over to that camp, and one in a hundred of stealing a canoe without getting killed."

and the "But if I don't go, we don't stand any chance at all. As soon as it gets dark enough, I'm going. It had better be to-morrow; tomorrow night will only find us weaker."

and the They studied the lake and picked out two islands as resting stages to break the long swim; and on the towering western range they chose a guide peak which would be

visible against the night sky. Curt happened to remember about Ralph's hand-line the previous evening and went looking for it. A fish had dragged the weight rock out into the shallows where it had wedged between two stones. A small chub was on the line when Curt pulled it in. He cut the chub into bait, threw the line out, caught a gray trout and half a dozen mullets. They scorched the fish over a little wisp of fire, and had their first meal in thirty hours.

Twilight came earlier than usual, for the sky was still clouded. They walked up to the north tip, and Curt stripped for his swim. The lake still ran wild with whitecaps and the strong wind, blowing three-quarters wrong, cut down his already slim chance.

He shook hands with Paul, waded out and started for the near island.

The water was numbing cold at first, but he struck up a vigorous pace that kept the chill out of his blood. In twenty minutes he raised his head and saw a spruce islet, his first stop, not far in front of him.

AT about that same time he heard a distant guarded shout. It sounded like Paul calling to him. He halted, listened, heard nothing more, and swam on. A minute later four shots came rolling across the lake. The peculiar sequence of them—!—!—!—!—stopped him short. It was a signal between him and Paul; they had used it a dozen times to summon each other. Paul must be calling him back.

He treaded water and debated what to do. Paul would never have summoned him without good reason. He could think of no reason so vital as going on and getting a canoe; but for some cause Paul wanted him to return, and Paul's judgment usually could be depended upon.

He turned around and headed back for the camp island.

Seventy-five yards off the lower tip, he made out two men standing at the wave edge. Nearer, he recognized Paul, and saw a canoe drawn up on the sand. Thoroughly mystified, he swam in, struck bottom and waded ashore.

Paul came running to meet him, bringing his clothes.

"Compagnon! It's Tenn-Og! He fetched us a canoe!"

"Wh-aa-tt?"

"He came just as soon as it was dark



enough that the others wouldn't see him."

"What's the idea?"

"He says he knew we had no canoe, and brought us one to get away in. He met Sonya over at their camp just after the fight last night, and she told him to bring us a boat."

Curt glanced at the craft, at the Indian. "Humph! LeNoir's using him to bait some deadfall for us. Let's find out what his game is." He dressed quickly, walked over to Tenn-Og, nodded to him. "It's a surprise to see you, friend. So you brought us a canoe. That's fine! But why?"

Tenn-Og pointed to his forehead and shoulder wounds.

"What made you pitch away from us down at the Iskitimwah?" Curt demanded.

Tenn-Og explained laboriously that he could not have helped them by staying, but by going back to his band he had been in a position to lend them real help.

"Is the white girl over there at the camp?" Curt asked.

She had left last night, Tenn-Og informed. LeNoir had started her north to the white *tyee* in charge of three dependable guides.

"Wasn't it you last evening," Curt inquired sardonically, "who led those three canoes down at the north tip of this island? Trying to kill us is a rather peculiar way of being a friend!"

Tenn-Og admitted leading the canoes. But, he added, at the right moment he had pulled his men out of the fight by shouting to them that the whites were killing the other Klosohees. According to the plans of the attack, he was to land at the north tip with his six men and rush the barricade from that side, while the others came at it from the south. When he backed off, it had broken up those plans.

Curt studied the dusky face sharply. It was the most impassive face he had ever met with, as unreadable as a granite mask. He remembered the dim figure gesticulating, and the three craft backing away so strangely. Tenn-Og's explanation did fit the circumstance, the whole story sounded plausible enough; but still he did not quite believe it.

"Siam-Klale and that 'breed have cooked up something for us," he told Paul. "They don't like the prospect of having to sit around on these islands for several days. They want to get it over with in a hurry, so they're using this fellow to trap us with.

Well, they've got another guess cominal And in the meantime we've got a canoe off a

Curt inspected the craft. It was a ho twenty-foot birchbark, large enough for time or six people. The Indian had also bro squa three extra paddles, sleeping robes for fift four of them, and food—several pound carbon jerky and two large roasted Tenn wrapped in leaves. That tempting the s he s T

"We'd better stay away from it, P his LeNoir is an artist with poison, and it's wron like him to salt grub with strychnine tryin send it to us. Let's be leaving this isla to r tomorrow at this time we'll be at as a Iskitimwah mouth, and by the next m " agai ing we'll have Ralph in Prince Rupert argu this Smoky is supposed to lead us into and trap, he's due for a disappointment; going to do the leading myself!"

All thoughts of going on after Karaki west hap had dropped out of his mind. In faili me shadow Sonya he was passing up a supe T eyes tive chance to locate the Cossack, bu did not matter. He was heading south, T of the Lilluars. Sonya could go on, if pres wanted to, and Karakhan could get aw 7 and It had to be. Ralph's life came first. The

They picked up the canoe, took it nea The yarc the barricade, and floated it. After mak Still mot Ralph over and laid him in. Curt show away, unworwardly thankful to see the l road C of that unlucky island.

"Have your friends got canoes out on now lake tonight, watching for us?" he ask very Tenn-Og.

The Indian nodded.

"Which way shall we go, to avoid them like

Tenn-Og gestured that they should wh west toward the mainland shore and the tain swing south down the lake. "No cano her, there," he told them, mostly with sig play "But this way"—he pointed east, where nearest islands lay—"hyas canoes go up a him T

"He said go west, Paul," Curt remark whe dryly. "That means we're going ea The Help me keep an eye on him. If he tr vivie to signal his outfit and bring them in loon us, he'll be calling his own finish."

Tenn-Og shrugged his shoulders a T grunted.

NOT far east of the island, Curt hear I ta a "merganser" call just ahead. C cour and Paul stopped, backed away, and veen their a little north. They ran into another sh mos

ss communal passing between two canoes. Backing a canoe off again, they made a third attempt to find a hole and reach the flag islets. Barely in time, Paul spotted a shadowy mottle squarely in front of them and no more than fifty yards away.

To escape east was clearly impossible. Tenn-Og certainly had told the truth when he said it was dangerous to go east.

The incident set Curt to thinking that his suspicions of the Indian might be wrong; that Tenn-Og might honestly be trying to help them. It was Indian nature to remember a kindness just as faithfully as a personal injury.

"Go that way," Tenn-Og pointed west again. "No canoes there." He did not argue or try to persuade, but merely pointed and stated facts.

"All right," Curt agreed, "we'll try the west. But understand this, if anything happens it can't happen too quick to keep me from putting a bullet between your eyes, friend. You *kumtux*?"

Tenn-Og nodded, without a flicker of expression on his dusky face.

They went back past their camp island and paddled on west toward the mainland. They were not challenged. Three hundred yards from the shore they swung south. Still they heard no signals, saw no shadowy mottles. It was as Tenn-Og had said; the road in that direction was clear.

Curt hardly knew what to think. Twice now the Indian's advice had proved right, very right. By the route he had suggested they had got free of the island and through the cordon of canoes. That didn't look like treachery. Furthermore it was Sonya who had sent him with that boat; and certainly she had not wanted them to meet harm. Whatever else he might think of her, he could not believe that she would play treacherous with Paul and Ralph and himself.

They dropped down toward the narrows where François and Jocku had been killed. The memory of that death cry was still vivid with Curt. As the dark bottle neck loomed up just ahead, he touched Tenn-Og.

"Any men guarding that?"

Tenn-Og nodded and held up six fingers. "When they call, I answer, you say nothing. I take you down through *skookum chuck*."

Curt studied the gantlet. The safe course was to portage around; but to work their way with heavy loads would waste most of the night, and it would be a dread-

ful ordeal for Ralph. He decided to take the gamble and attempt to get through by water. If Tenn-Og was lying they could rid themselves of him in short order, and then try to shoot their way past those others. They stood a fair chance.

They skirted into the entrance. The dark timber flitted by, close on either hand. Five hundred yards down, down at the narrowest part, they were suddenly challenged. The voice came from a clump of junipers, ahead of them and on the right-hand bank. An instant later another voice rang out on the left. Two hidden parties, with less than a hundred feet separating them—no wonder François and Jocku had met doom there.

Tenn-Og stood up and answered. Curt held his rifle at alert, with the trigger safety on red. The canoe came in between the two parties. Nothing happened. It drifted on past. Still nothing happened. It swam on down and down, while Tenn-Og talked back and forth with the watchers. It swam around a bend below, it was caught in the quickened waters and swept along, it left the ambush out of sight and hearing. Before they could make themselves believe it, they were through the gantlet, safe—with the open river ahead!

A mile down, when they breathed freely again and were speeding south as fast as three paddles could take them, Curt crept forward and laid his hand on Tenn-Og's arm.

"I make mistake," he said slowly, in the Jargon. "Tenn-Og talk straight, save white-man friends. I make *hyas hyas* mistake. I'm sorry. You *kumtux*?"

Tenn-Og shrugged his shoulders and grunted, with no more expression on his claw-scarred face than when they had suspected him of treachery and had threatened to shoot him.

## CHAPTER XV

SOMETIME after midnight they came to an island where Curt's party had camped on the up trip. Whipping ashore, they ate part of the food which Tenn-Og had brought and flung themselves down on the sand for a five-minute rest.

That camp site held memories for Curt, poignant memories of the evening his party had stayed there. As he stared at the stars and thought of Sonya going north with those three Indian guides, it came

home to him that in sending Tenn-Og to them with the canoe she had run a big risk, closely guarded as she had been. It was pretty fine of her to do that.

The incident made him look back on their whole relationship with less bitterness and more honesty, and he had to acknowledge that from first to last she had shot square with him. She had not asked for his help on the trip; he had volunteered it. And later, when she saw he was falling in love with her, she had said and done everything that a girl could do to halt it. Rosalie Marlin would never have tried to stop him. Rosalie would have taken pride in having another scalp at her belt.

When they got up to go on, he saw that Ralph had drifted back to the borderline of consciousness; his eyes half open, his lips moving. He was too far gone to talk, but he recognized his friends and understood what they said to him. Curt bent down, encouraging:

"Don't let go, Ralph. We're leaving the Lilluars and taking you out. Tomorrow at this time you'll be in Prince Rupert, and there they'll fix you up."

Twice more during the rest of the night Ralph came out of his stupor for a few moments. On the second time he tried hard to tell Curt something. Curt believed it was something about Sonya, for her name was distinguishable in the broken whispers. But whatever it was, it went unsaid.

Morning came at last, with the gray smoke-mist curling up and trout breaking the surface in silvery flashes. They stopped ten minutes to rest, and then hurried on all the faster, now that they had light to travel by. With Tenn-Og in the prow, guiding them down the river that he knew so intimately, they shot down breath-taking *sautes* and streaked over dangerous white water without pausing to scout a course. Their hands were blistered from the paddle work, their arms ached intolerably, but for Ralph's sake they drove themselves to the limit. One hour of merciless paddling, then five minutes of rest; another hour and another five minutes on the sand—in that steady relentless fashion they reeled off the long miles of the flight south.

At noon they came to a sluggish lake of reed patches and sloughs where ducks and geese and teal in countless numbers had their summer rookeries. As they were threading a short-cut channel, Curt glanced back toward the lake head and happened

to see a colony of little black terns out of a slough and explode like a peacock's feathers. Evidently something out of the ordinary had flushed them.

Suspicious, he and Paul stopped, beat into a thick clump of flags and waited. A minute later two canoes came skimming around a reedy point and headed downward toward them. Traveling light, three white men to a boat, they had come even faster than his party.

To let them go past would only have been an ambush and fight farther down the river. They had to be stopped. Waiting till they were within easy range, he and Paul opened on them with a sudden blast. The chattering bullets, smashing through the water line of the craft, sank them before the thunderstruck Klososhees could realize that ambushing was a game which they could play at. With their canoes foundering under them, the six leaped out and swam for the nearest flags.

Muddled and bedraggled, they stood up, their bit of quivering bog and stream waited to be shot, as Curt's canoe nosed across toward them.

"Tell 'em we're not going to kill 'em," Curt bade Tenn-Og. "Find out where the main band is and what they're doing, and where the white girl is."

He listened closely as Tenn-Og talked with the six, but he could not understand a word of the clicks and grunts except the names of Siam-Klale and LeNoir.

When the palaver was over and he had made sure that the six men could be reached across to the shore, he backed the canoe and headed his party down stream again.

The main band, Tenn-Og said, had covered the escape of the whites and had started north to Karakhan's place to guard the *tyee*. These six runners had been sent south on the chance that they might catch up with the whites and ambush them. Sonya was on her way north; nothing had been heard of her since she left with the three guides.

"Do you know where this white *tyee* is hiding?" he asked Tenn-Og.

At the headwaters lake of the Lilluars the Indian told him. He himself had once lived at that lake, almost at the very place where the white man's cabin now stood.

A week ago Curt would have considered that information priceless, but now it meant little. In a general way he did plan to return later and make a second attempt to



get Karakhan; but in all probability the Russian would be out of the Lilluars and gone by that time. He had a plane and plenty of gas for it, as LeNoir's trading account showed. The wearisome job of following his trackless air path would have to be done all over again.

"How can you go back to your people, Tenn-Og?" he asked. "Those six are going to tell the others that you were with us, helping us."

With a grunt and shrug Tenn-Og stated that he did not care whether he went back or not. He was almost an outcast now, he said, because of Siam-Klale.

Ever since his talk with Tenn-Og that first night, when the Indian gave him so much information voluntarily, Curt had felt that he stood off somehow from the other Kloshees. His tones now and his reference to the sub-chief implied there was some bitter personal feud between Siam-Klale and him.

By dint of sign talk and labored questions, Curt got the story of that feud. . . . Two years previously Tenn-Og had gone roving at the northern edge of the Kloshe range and had brought a Sikanni girl back to his clan. He had got her by capture, but she seemed a willing enough captive, Curt gathered. Tenn-Og had evidently loved her—at the mere mention of her, after two years' time, his stoical face showed emotion. Siam-Klale immediately took a fancy to her; and to escape him she and Tenn-Og slipped away from the tribe and lived by themselves. They managed to elude his hunt that summer, but when the autumnal snows came he was able to track them and find the cave where they had made their home. Coming there one morning when Tenn-Og was gone, he overpowered the girl, threw her down, disfigured her horribly with a glowing brand, and then left. Rather than live on as a thing of pity, the girl flung herself into a chasm.

**T**ENN-OG thereupon joined the southern band. He had been nursing his vengeance ever since, but against the powerful sub-chief he was helpless. And none of the other men would league with him or raise a hand against Siam-Klale. . . . The story, especially this lust and brutality in Siam-Klale's nature, made Curt sharply uneasy about Sonya. She was up in that country alone, in the charge

of Indians who were completely under the thumb of the sub-chief. If he and the main band overtook her party, he might seize her, brush LeNoir aside, and bury himself with her in that unknown country.

As the afternoon wore along, a perceptible change came over Ralph. He began tossing and moaning; his face, so bloodless until then, became flushed with fever, and he lapsed at times into delirium, when he talked incoherently of Sonya. At first Curt could not decide what the change boded; but as the signs became more pronounced, he recognized their grim meaning. He could never get Ralph out, or even get to the plane with him. Ralph was dying.

Just at twilight they reached the Iskitimwah mouth, having covered in twenty-four hours a stretch of river which had taken his party four whole days on the up trip. He called a halt. All need of hurrying had passed, and the buffeting of the waves was causing Ralph intense pain. The most they could do was to ease him for the little time that remained.

Near the tributary mouth they went ashore on a pine island, the island of black lilies, where Curt had spent some dark hours once. He did not recognize the place till they had landed, and then he would not change. Inland at a mossy spot they spread the sleeping robes and carried Ralph there and laid him down.

All three of them were stumbling from exhaustion. On top of the heavy strain of the fight and the long day of imprisonment, they had had no sleep in more than sixty hours; and had just finished a terrific stretch of canoe work—twice around the clock without a pause.

Curt made Paul and Tenn-Og eat a little food, and then took them a couple of rods aside. "You two lie down," he bade, "and get some rest. I'll stay up with Ralph. I can do everything that needs to be done. God knows it's not much."

He walked back and took up his sorrowful vigil. Ralph had passed into another stage, a step nearer the final Dark. He no longer tossed or muttered in delirium; he seemed to be sleeping quietly, with only the flickering of his eyelids showing that it was not sleep. Curt prayed he would pass so, without waking.

Curt kindled a little fire to make the place seem less lonely to Ralph if he should wake up before he died.

In the last two hours, since realizing that Ralph was not to be with them, he had made up his mind to go back north and try to capture Karakhan. Tenn-Og could take them to that headwater lake. If Smash had kept his rendezvous, they would have a plane and could make the trip in less than three hours. With any luck at all, he would not only end his long hunt then and there, but he could shield Sonya and bring her out. In spite of her association with Karakhan he felt it his duty, as a man, to look after her safety.

The time verged on midnight. When he glanced again at Ralph he was surprised to see that the latter's eyes were open.

He took Ralph's hand, to let him know that a friend was with him. Ralph looked around, evidently looking for Sonya.

He gazed up at Curt for a moment. His lips parted. Curt bent lower.

"Where are—we, Curt?"

"Down river, Ralph. Back at the Iskitimwah."

"You thought—could get me—out?"

Curt nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Where's Sonya, Curt? I'd like her—a little talk—"

Curt started to say that Sonya was on her way to Karakhan, but he checked himself. No need to recall that painful fact to Ralph's wandering mind.

"She's sleeping, Ralph. I'll wake her before long. She asked me to."

"Then she didn't try—to reach him, Curt?" Ralph asked, struggling weakly against the fog in his brain. "I thought—she did go."

"No, she gave that over, Ralph."

"I'm glad. She'd have been left—alone in there—with those Indians and that half-breed. I tried to tell her so—but she believed she could get out—somehow—afterward."

Curt thought that Ralph's mind must be wandering badly. What did he mean by "left alone in there"? She would be with Karakhan, wouldn't she? And what did Ralph mean by "she'd get out, somehow, afterward"? After what?

"You'll watch out for her now, Curt?"

Ralph begged. "She likes you—more than she—lets herself think. You'll take care of her, won't you?"

Curt promised. He felt himself on the verge of something portentous, a discovery of the whole truth about Sonya's trip. Very plainly she *had* told Ralph.

Before he could word the questions Don't his mind, Ralph's lips were moving again.

"She wanted to—trust you, Curt. I wanted to tell you, and ask your help. But she felt she—didn't dare. She was sure—just who you were; and she was afraid you'd—judge her harshly. Afraid you'd send her back out—if you knew. That would have been—a terrible blow to her. She couldn't rest, couldn't live—she'd hunted him down."

Ralph sank back, limp and quiet. His tremor passed through him. For a moment Curt thought it was the end. Then came a faint rally.

The incoherent words he had just listened to bewildered Curt. Ralph was distinctly implying that when Sonya reached the headwaters lake she would be exposed to some great danger. How could that be so—if she was joining the Russian? Another Ralph's expression about her "hunting Karakhan down" sounded like anything but a love quest.

"Ralph," he pleaded urgently, knowing that Ralph had but a minute or two more to live. "try to tell me—what did you mean about her being left alone up there?"

Ralph did not seem to hear him, but pursued his own drifting thoughts. "I'm glad you listened to me and—didn't go. I know she's got courage, but just a girl, by herself, she'd never have managed—to kill him. She'd have failed, and he'd have left her there. He'd have thrown her—to those others."

"To kill him—?" Curt echoed, jolted from head to feet. That broken phrase sent his world crashing out of its orbit. He could only stare at Ralph, stupefied. "Him"—that word meant Karakhan. It pointed straight at the Cossack. But Sonya, killing him, killing the man to whom she had written that letter—surely Ralph must be so delirious that he did not know what he was saying. Or *was he delirious?*

"Ralph!" he begged frantically, in a race against the hovering Dark. "Why's she hunting Karakhan? Tell me *that*. What does she want with him? Ralph, do you understand me?"

His questions went unanswered, Ralph lay quiet, his lips apart, his eyes closed. For a minute he did not stir. Then with a sudden jerk he moved, rose to his elbow and grasped Curt's arm with an unnatural strength.

"Curt! Don't let her go back there!"

Don't ever let her try to kill him! Take her out of this country!"

"I will, Ralph. I'll take her out. But Ralph, listen! Tell me—"

"Curt! Wake her! Please bring her here. I'll—make—her—promise—"

His grasp broke from Curt's arm and he fell back.

In desperation Curt shook him by the shoulder. "Ralph! Ralph!" But he got no answer. He pressed a finger into Ralph's wrist, and felt no pulse. And then he slowly realized that the answer was forever beyond him. Ralph was gone.

Through misty eyes he saw the lines of suffering smooth out and give way to a peace, the peace of death.

FOR a long time afterward he sat there beside the fire, with his stunned thoughts in a chaotic whirl. His tired mind, so tired by two days of inconceivable strain, refused to grapple with Ralph's broken words and make a coherent story of them.

Sonya, trying to kill the Russian—it turned upside down everything that he had been feeling and thinking about her. He had read her letter, had heard her own words to LeNoir; and against all that he had only a few halting phrases from a man who was dying. Yet he believed Ralph, and all his former idealization of Sonya came flooding back to bolster up his belief. He understood, now, why Sonya had not confided in him, desperately as she had needed his help. She had feared he would judge her harshly. That was what she meant when she told him, "Something that I consider right in my deepest heart might seem to you an unthinkable wrong." Her intention was beyond the law. In the eyes of most people she was making a criminal of herself, a person to be hunted down and punished for murder. But even weightier than her fear of his harsh judgment was her certainty that if he only knew the truth, knew the dangers she was plunging into and the frightful risks she was running, he would have taken her peremptorily out of the country.

He had no idea of the motive driving her to kill Karakhan; he could not even guess at it; but he did see now that it had crowded everything else out of her life. "She couldn't rest, couldn't live, till she'd hunted him down"—that was how Ralph had worded her burning purpose. Noth-

ing existed for her except to reach Karakhan and kill him. And he, the blind self-centered fool!—he had forced himself on her when she was so distracted; had cruelly insulted her a dozen times and scorned her overture of affection that last evening; had abandoned her just when she needed him and allowed her to go away with that 'breed and sub-chief.

There was one thing he could do to make partial amends—get north to that headwaters lake and protect her and bring her out. In a general way he had already planned to start back north, and now his realization of her danger galvanized him into action. Should he return by canoe, or go up the Iskitimwah and run the risk of Smash not being there with the Fairchild? If only he could feel sure of Smash. One could never depend on him. A pretty face at Tellacet, a dance at Hazelton, would make him forget a rendezvous with a partner. But by canoe the trip would take a week; it was up stream, and he could travel only by night, for parties would be combing the river and ambushing the portages. A week would be too late. He had to be there at the lake when Sonya came. According to what Tenn-Og had said about trail and distance, she and her guides should reach Karakhan's refuge late the next evening or on the morning of the following day. By plane he could make it, but not by canoe.

He let Paul and the Indian sleep on. It took a great effort of will not to wake them and start at once; but they had to have rest. If he reached old John's lake by noon, he would have plenty of time. *If Smash had not failed them.*

When dawn came, he searched the island for a suitable place, carried Ralph's body to it, made a secure cairn of rocks, and then scattered seed pods of woodbine and phlox around it in the fresh woods loam. Selecting a tall minaret pine that stood conspicuously to itself, he climbed it, and with Tenn-Og's belt-ax, cut off all its branches except the rounded crown, making a lobstick to the unselfish heroism of the man who had died there.

He woke the other two then, told Paul about his talk with Ralph and about his plans. They left immediately, heading up the Iskitimwah.

Paul and Tenn-Og had got only six hours' sleep, but it had freshened them, and the party made good time. At nine o'clock



they whipped past the overfalls pool where Curt had stopped and bathed on his previous trip alone. At noon they skirled out upon the rendezvous lake.

Curt took one glance along the south shore and groaned. The plane was not in sight.

They fired shots in the hope that Smash might have drawn the Fairchild back into some little bay. But they got no answer. Smash had failed them.

They paddled over toward the cabin. As they drew in, Paul noticed a bit of white hanging from a low pine branch. It was Smash's handkerchief, put there to draw attention. A tin cigarette box was tied to the limb beside it. As Curt suspected, the box held a note.

OLD TIMER:

I'm clearing out for Tellacet. Our left wing tank sprung a slow leak and I thought it ought to be fixed. I'll get back tomorrow morning without fail.

SMASH.

P.S. There's a dance at Lake Marianne tomorrow night, and I may hop over there; but I'll be back bright and early the next morning.

Curt turned the note over, looking for the date. There was none. Smash had crazily forgotten even to date his message.

In the furious anger of helplessness he tore the note to bits. The idiotic message and the crack-up of his plans sent him tramping the landwash in a blind fury. A tank leak—hell! Smash had got tired of being alone and had flounced off to soak up some of his sociability. Now when they desperately needed him and the very hours were precious, he was Lochinvaring around somewhere, several hundred miles away. At the critical time when Sonya would reach that lake, they would not be there, he and Paul. They were stranded, in a God-forsaken wilderness, with two hundred and forty mountain miles between themselves and her.

## CHAPTER XVI

ON the evening of the third day Sonya's party stopped at twilight and made camp in a drogue of river-bank pines. The three Indians, her escort on the trip north, built her a little lean-to, deftly wove a balsam-twigg mattress for her blankets, and otherwise made her as comfortable as they could.

The leader of the three, an older half

brother of Tenn-Og, called the halt, out of consideration for the white girl in they m charge. Sonya herself would rather long th pushed on to the headwaters lake chief. night. It was only twenty miles far Sonya and they could reach it by dawn. Murryi when the end of her long quest was in sight she wanted it and its harrowing uncertainty he wa their c

In spite of the hard trip that day she plunged not feel tired. She was at too high a terto s sion. She walked back the tote trail to two o overfalls which her party had just portat that s around, and sat down on the lip of the But r thirty feet above the plunging water. of th With a secret rejoicing she had hefnally how Curt and Paul had beaten off th At fourteen canoes. But she had known thebroth do it! Tenn-Og no doubt had taken th to ta a boat after the attack, and they were sparty now. But where were they? they

In wishful fancy she tried to imag go m Curt there with her, his rifle between lake knees, his lean hard face between her So and danger; but the memory of his cha on t drove the fancy away. He had even he s nored her overture to him that last even to K And yet she knew that if she came out I her this alive she would write to him and her him to come to see her. She believed on r had had some cause to change so, so Don reason which was all a mistake and whi she could persuade him to tell her. 'cros

A few yards down the portage trail t So Indians unexpectedly came swing orde she around a buckbrush thicket. They w she with carrying a loaded canoe, and behind th Lill came others, a large party. Sonya start braz to her feet in surprise. The churning o was falls had muffled the noise; she had n over known they were about till they sudden and appeared.

They were Kloshees. Why, they w meo the main band! — there were Siam-Kl two the and LeNoir! A sudden fear surged thro her. Ralph and Curt and Paul—what h can happened to them? S

LeNoir's glum face reassured her. ord she went up to camp with the party, her told her the news. Nichols had be her tai wounded, he said; the other two had ma ste to a shelter for him the next day and he to sec not been seen walking about. Shortly af Hi be dark that evening they had escaped, w been through that bottle neck and it must ha been theirs. They probably were gettin

out of the country, but on the chance that they might swing north again he was taking the main band home to protect his lake chief.

Sonya guessed that Curt and Paul were hurrying Ralph out to civilization where she could get medical attention. She prayed he was not badly hurt. She was glad of their escape, but in another way the news plunged her into a black dejection. Hitherto she could feel that Curt was within two or three days' swift travel of her and that she might possibly get back to him. But now when he was heading south, out of the Lilluars, she felt completely and finally abandoned.

At the camp LeNoir sent Tenn-Og's half brother and two other Indians on ahead to take Karakhan the news. The main party was to travel on that night, too; but they would have to pause for supper and go more slowly and so could not reach the lake till morning.

Sonya wondered why the 'breed insisted on traveling that night. For some reason he seemed in a great hurry to deliver her to Karakhan.

He commanded her gruffly, as he brought her some fish and dried meat: "Tonight, on res' of dis treep, you stay close by me. Don' step into de dark; don't get out my *canot*; keep hold my belt w'en we walk 'cross any portage. Onderstand?"

Sonya promised to obey him, though the orders puzzled her. During the hasty meal she was aware of Siam-Klale ogling her with narrowed eyes, as he had done at the Lilluar forks; but now his stare was so brazen that it unnerved her. As the party was setting the boats to water, he trundled over to LeNoir and said something to him and jerked a thumb in her direction. Immediately a violent quarrel sprang up between them, and Sonya gathered that Siam-Klale was demanding she should go in his canoe.

She understood LeNoir's haste and his orders, then. The 'breed was afraid for her, afraid that the sub-chief might seize her that night and cut aside into the mountains.

LeNoir won the argument, and she stepped into his canoe. She was grateful to him in a way, but she could read his secret thoughts and they frightened her. His proprietary attitude was veiled now, because he was afraid of Karakhan; but what about the time, only a few hours

ahead, when Karakhan would lie dead in his cabin? That incident at Russian Lake showed her what she could expect from Teeste LeNoir.

In that whole band she had but one friend, Tenn-Og's half brother. For an Indian, he had been good to her on the trip. He might possibly take her across the mountains by a secret trail and hand her over to some treaty band who would get her back among white people. But it was a slender hope. He would hardly risk his life for a *squaw-siche*; and even if he did, he stood little chance against Siam-Klale and LeNoir the poisoner.

She made herself stop thinking of anything beyond tomorrow morning. She would need all her strength and poise for her meeting with Karakhan.

All that day her thoughts had been running on her father; and now, on the trip up the dark river, they came back to him, and she tried to feel that he was with her in spirit, watching over her safety again as he had done during that white Siberian winter. Now he and Carl were gone. Dead, he and Carl, her menfolk who had been all the world to her—she dared not let herself think of them as dead, for it was only recently that she had pulled herself out of the black bottomless tragedy of their deaths and found heart to go on living.

KARAKHAN was reading a batch of month-old newspapers that midnight when the three runners came into his cabin with LeNoir's report.

The moment he heard about the escape of Ralston and his partner, he made up his mind to get away in his plane as soon as he had light enough for flying. The reassurance which LeNoir relayed—that those two had fled south and the main band was coming north as a guard—reassured him not at all. His intuition told him it was time to go. That fellow Ralston had a charmed life. He would not be killed or stopped. It simply was not in the cards.

He wavered over what to do about Sonya. On Helen Mathieson, or any of the others, he would not have wasted a thought; but Sonya Volkov stood out by herself. In the last few days he had been thinking of her till she had become a madness in his blood; and all the clamorous impulses within him rebelled at the thought

of leaving her there. She would go along with him willingly. On the swift flight to Mexico she would be an impediment, true enough—an extra person would cut down the gas load, and inquisitive officials along the coast might ask questions. But the risk was slight, and when he got to Mexico he would have her there with him!

After throwing his personal effects into a duffle bag, he went down to the hangar, turned the Speedair so that it headed lake-ward, and untied all the mooring ropes except one slip-hitch around a pontoon brace. Once he started to make his getaway, it would be distinctly wise to go in a hurry. He wanted to be skimming out upon the lake, beyond canoe and rifle reach, before his intention burst upon LeNoir and Siam-Klale. They were going to turn ugly when they realized he was escaping and letting them hold the sack.

The Speedair was so vital to him that he ordered a pair of Klosohees, two of his bodyguards whom he could trust, to stay there at the hangar and guard the ship. It was just possible that LeNoir might suspect him of wanting to escape and might try to cripple the plane.

At dawn, when the ten canoes came swinging around the timbered headland, he was standing on the log pier, waiting. Strung out for several hundred yards, the flotilla skirled up along the shore toward him till at last, with pulses hammering, he picked out Sonya in LeNoir's craft.

The 'breed stroked his canoe in front of the others and nosed in to the landing. Sonya rose up, swaying slightly to the rocking of the water. Karakhan reached her hand, clasped it, helped her step up on the logs.

"Sonya!" He greeted her. "You have really come! I haven't quite believed it until now!"

Sonya's clear eyes looked at him steadily. She did not respond to the pressure of his hand. "Yes, I've come," she said, in an even voice. "I'm glad to meet you again."

Karakhan was disappointed—and puzzled. Her greeting had none of the passion of her letter. But perhaps it was only her natural shyness before LeNoir and the Indians.

"You're tired," he said, with a show of solicitude. He could not take his eyes from her. "Come up with me to the cabin. I've a breakfast of sorts ready for you."

He lowered his voice. "Then we're leaving here. Immediately. I'll explain, *Loubem*, when we're alone and a thousand versions from this place."

As they walked up the footpath to the cabin, he grew more and more disappointed and mystified by Sonya's attitude. The meeting with her was not as he had expected. She seemed even colder and more distant than in Victoria.

Inside the cabin he took her forcibly to his arms and kissed her, thinking she would break down her shyness. Sonya turned her face away, and he felt her whole body stiffen—at the mere contact with him, it seemed.

"What's wrong, Sonya?" he demanded. "You don't appear at all glad." He was impatient with her coldness and utter lack of response.

Sonya freed herself, without answering. She stepped over to the rough block table and behind it, so that it stood between her and Karakhan. With a glance about the room and a glance at the Indians outside, she confronted him.

"It's been a long trail from Victoria here," she said, dropping the last pretense of friendliness. "And it was a long hunt before that, to get my first trace of where you'd gone. But that's past. *I'm here.*"

Karakhan stared wide-eyed at her, with all his ardor forsaking him. He saw, at last, that her coldness was no girlish make-believe but a dead earnestness. The expression in her eyes made him suddenly afraid.

"Your conquests with women have always been so easy," she intoned, "that you can't imagine any woman not falling in love with you, and so when you get a letter from one that called you 'Beloved' when she meant 'You white beast,' you swallowed the hook and sent your 'breed' to bring her to you. You were proof against traps and poison and the professional Police hounds, but you weren't proof against *that* lure! You've had your way with a great number of women; you've even dealt in them, buying and selling; and you came to regard them as harmless things. But where men—all the men ever sent after you—failed to bring you to account, it was a woman who trailed you, and reached here, and *s's here now!*"

Karakhan backed up a step and his jaw dropped. If anything of his delusion about her remained, the loathing packed into that



epithet, "You white beast," toppled it and shattered it to bits. A suspicion volted through him—*did she know? Had she found out?* Impossible; he had worked too carefully and anonymously. But was anything impossible to one who had trailed him as consummately as she had done?

Her next words left him in no doubt. "There in Victoria, when you started negotiating with father and Carl about that lumber importation, I told them that you were a dangerous man, as dangerous as a cobra. They didn't take my warning, because I had no evidence except my intangible judgment of you. With those worthless safe-conduct papers that you forged they went away to Vladivostok—to close that big lumber deal for their company, they thought. And the G.P.U. got them when they landed, as you intended. And there—in the Loufyanka—in that execution chamber under the hill—father and Carl—"

Her voice broke. For a moment she seemed on the verge of going all to pieces. But she steadied herself, dashed the tears from her eyes; and her right hand crept inside her blouse.

IT was genuinely news to Karakhan that her two men kin had been put to death by the secret police. He had indeed sent them to Vladivostok with forged papers on a nonexistent deal, as she said; and he had written the G.P.U. anonymously that they were coming, so that they would be arrested. In the critical days just before he cashed in on his huge swindle, the Soviet agents had become suspicious that something was wrong in their trading with western Canada; but by pointing their suspicions at the Volkov men and sending those two across to the Siberian port, he had gained time to close out his affairs and vanish. He had expected her father and brother to get prison terms, but this news of their death surprised him, for they had become Canadian citizens and were well-known.

Now, as he stared at Sonya across the table, her whole search and motive and intention became instantly clear to him. Her nine-months' hunt had been a vengeance hunt, to kill him for causing the death of her father and brother.

"I can't imagine what you're talking about," he denied, not in any hope of shaking Sonya's knowledge, but to win a few

minutes and adjust himself to this stupefying turn. He had not failed to notice her right hand sliding into her blouse. It was claspings a gun, the gun she intended to kill him with.

"You didn't send them over to Vladivostok, did you?" Sonya spiked his denial. "You didn't inform the G.P.U. privately that father and Carl were the ones who were posing as Soviet trade officials? You didn't send them to death in order to squeeze out a few weeks of safety for yourself? An old refugee who lives in Vladivostok and used to know my father, found out about it and wrote me from Harbin."

In the face of death, the nearest that death had ever brushed him, Karakhan was shaken with a cringing terror. He was at her mercy, and she had no mercy. He had a minute more to live, unless he acted. But he was helpless.

"Sonya, I'm sorry about your father and brother. Won't you let me explain exactly the extent of my guilt?"

He folded his hands behind his back, apparently as a show of helplessness, but his fingers closed over the iron-tipped ski staff against the wall. Even so, he dared not move. With the table between them, as Sonya had maneuvered him at the very start of their talk, he could not lift the staff and swing and hit her before she could shoot. She held only a second's advantage, but for him that second was the difference between life and death.

"Let you explain your guilt?" she met his plea. "Anything can be explained." Her hand came out of her blouse gripping a small black automatic.

Karakhan deliberately looked past her, at the window behind. With a superb control of his expression, he made a gesture, as though to some ally of his who had crept up to the window and was training a gun on her.

"Don't!" he cried. "Don't shoot!"

The ruse would never have caught Curt Tennyson. But Sonya was on the first man hunt of her life; and for all the brilliancy of that hunt she knew nothing of the subtleties which come only from desperate experiences. She whirled, glanced at the empty window—and her second's advantage was gone. In the moment that her eyes left him, Karakhan gripped the staff, lifted it, and swung at her. Sonya threw up her arm to save herself. Her act broke the full force of the blow, but the heavy

clublike thing knocked her arm away and struck her a glancing smash along the temple. She reeled, and her gun went clattering against the sheet-iron stove.

Karakhan lifted the staff for another blow, but it was not necessary; his first had knocked her senseless. She clutched the table blindly for support, her brave heart fighting against the numbing darkness; but then she slowly collapsed and sank to the floor.

In the throbbing stillness Karakhan stood over her, breathing heavily, looking down at her white face. When he saw that she was merely stunned, he picked her up lightly, carried her over to the bunk, tied her hands and feet securely with thongs ripped from his snowshoes, and gagged her with his kerchief. He did not want her screaming when she came to; it would let those others know that he was getting away from there.

He watched her come to. Her eyes flickered open. She stared up at him, not yet fully comprehending; then glanced about the cabin. When she looked back to him again, he saw the realization come into her eyes that her hunt had ended in a horrible failure.

She broke out in an insane violence. She struggled to tear the *babische* from her wrists and ankles. She flung herself off the bunk and tried to roll toward the little automatic by the stove. Karakhan seized her. He carried her back to the bunk and lashed her upon it.

They stared at each other, Sonya defiant, Karakhan enjoying his sense of mastery.

"So you came here to kill me, sweetheart," he said. "I should have known. Now what shall I do to you in return, before I go away from here? You are thinking I will harm you. Not at all. I don't mean to lift a finger against you. I did intend, little one, to take you along on my escape; but since you do not like me, I won't force my attentions upon you or make you go. Instead, I am going to allow you your freedom. In short, I am going to leave you here."

He paused, to enjoy the effect of his words upon Sonya. He watched the blood ebb from her face, saw a terror come into her eyes in place of her defiance a few moments ago.

"You won't lack attention, little one," he added, with a wolfish smile on his mouth. "That half-blood and the Indian

will be fighting over you in an hour now. You probably would prefer Len, but personally I think the Indian will—he has a whole clan behind him. —either way, *Loubemka*, it will be a long time before you see a white again."

## CHAPTER XVII

UNTIL he reached old John's lake the Iskitimwah, the prospect of getting into his plane and whirling north had buoyed Curt up and kept him going long after he had gone dead on his feet. But he had reached the limit of human endurance, and the shock of finding himself hopelessly stranded, through Smash's truancy, pushed him over the limit. Stumbling under a pine tree, slumped down, almost in a collapse, he dropped into the merciful oblivion of sleep.

Tenn-Og began looking around the cabin, reading signs. He announced presently that Smash had not been there yesterday or the day before that. He had left three days ago.

Paul cursed him in four languages. According to his note he should have returned yesterday. A day overdue already—even *le bon Dieu* knew when he would take a notion to come back.

To sit around and watch the sky for a plane that did not come was more than Paul could bear. Wisely he kept himself busy. He drew out the canoe and gummed it, freshened up the musty cabin and chopped a dead jackpine into firewood.

Near seven o'clock Curt woke up. Paul had supper ready, but Curt could not force himself to eat. The thought of Sonya drawing nearer and nearer that headwater lake sent him tramping the landwash again in distraction. At each turn he glanced up at the late afternoon sun, little by little abandoning hope that Smash would come any more that day.

Paul and Tenn-Og made a two-pronged javelin, hardened the points in the fire; and went down to a rock jut to spear trout. As Curt turned once, he saw they had stopped fishing and were listening intently, looking around the horizon. A few moments later he caught a far-away hum, faint as a mosquito's song. It rapidly grew louder, deeper, and changed to a throaty drone. He located its direction, due south, and whirled to look.

Out above a lofty range hove a glistening speck, shining in the slant evening sun. It came on and on, and at last he distinguished the lines of his Fairchild.

The drone died away as the engine was cut to an idle revv. From its height of ten thousand feet the plane glided down and down, banked over the lake, leveled off, touched and came taxiing shoreward.

The three leaped into their canoe and darted out to meet it.

As they swung around the propeller and clambered upon a pontoon, Smash opened a panel and flipped his cigarette into the water.

"Hullo! Didn't keep you waiting, did I, Curt? Darned sorry; but say, you ought to see the dance pavilion and the whole layout down there at Lake Maria—uh—Why, what's the matter, Curt?"

Curt glared at him tight-lipped, sent the canoe spinning with a kick, slammed open the door and climbed into the cabin.

"I'll take the controls. Get back in the rear place; I want Tenn-Og up front with me."

He lifted the tank flaps and glanced at the gauges. One-third full! For a moment he was tempted to throw Smash off on that wilderness shore and let him get out to Russian Lake afoot, if he could. It was like Smash, with his mind on Lake Marianne, to come off with barely enough gas to return to Tellacet. There was plenty to reach the Lilluar headwaters, but none to bring the ship back south. When they reached the lake they would have no gas to maneuver with or get out to civilization.

For the first time in their acquaintance he felt a repugnance toward Smash's care-free irresponsibility. Hitherto he had been tolerant, but now when he saw how easily tragedy to others could flow from that playboy attitude, he wanted nothing more to do with Smash ever, or with anybody of his drifting undependable kind. When any sort of a test came, Smash was found wanting.

Taking off, he circled to five thousand feet and started west, down the Iskitimwah. Fifteen minutes later, as he sailed out over the river-widening and the island of black lilies, he saw Tenn-Og look down at the country below and blink astonished eyes. Fifteen minutes—and that same trip had taken six hard canoe-hours that morning!

Intending to approach his goal from the

west in order to keep from flying over the main band of Kloshees, he headed on westward for sixty miles, then swung north and started up across the ranges, gradually picking up altitude till the needle quivered on fifteen thousand.

Tenn-Og kept looking out of the panel windows on each side, trying desperately to guide the flight. In the deep valleys under keel twilight was already gathering. At their great height, where rivers were silver threads, lakes no bigger than one's thumbnail, and mountain ranges merely rows of anthills on the horizon, the country looked as strange as a new land to the Indian. But his job was to guide them, and he came through with it. As a mountain nomad he was somewhat used to heights, and by recognizing a familiar range or lake system now and then, he was able to keep his bearings.

At last he touched Curt's arm and pointed twenty-odd miles east at two lordly cloud-wrapped mountains.

"Sunali and Dinaggwah," he said; and he indicated that on the other side of them lay the headwaters lake.

Curt studied the giant twins carefully. He had to get down on that lake unheard and unseen, for at the slightest hint of a plane in that country Karakhan would escape in his own ship, and they had no gas to follow. If the Fairchild could climb high enough, he could cut off the engine and glide those twenty-five miles to the lake and so get there unheard. But to reach it without being seen was a harder problem, calling for all the flying skill he had.

There was a flock of clouds swirling around the two giants and filling the pass between them. If he could keep behind some big cloud on his approach and fly through the pass by instruments, he would come out on the shadow side of Sunali. It would be twilight there and the plane would hardly be visible a mile away.

He put the Fairchild into a steep circling climb. The thermometer on the wing strut showed sixteen below, and at nineteen thousand feet it dropped to twenty-one. He noticed his companions nodding drowsily, and he kept a sharp watch over his own senses.

In the thin air he managed to get another thousand out of his plane. Twenty thousand feet high, he looked through a rift of cloud between the two mountains



and caught a glimpse of the dark lake valley beyond. Cutting off the engine, he pointed the ship at the great cleft, and began the long silent glide.

Heading on and on toward the snowy pass, he plunged at last into the clouds that hovered around the giants. For a space of five minutes he slipped silently through fleecy woolpack, where the sky above and earth below were blotted out and only his instruments kept him pointed true.

When he came out of the woolpack, he was through the pass and down in the purple shadows of Sunali.

Dropping on down, with the dark waters slowly coming up to meet him, he veered in toward the south shore, under Tenn-Og's guidance. Three miles from Karakhan's cabin, he leveled off, plowed water, and came to a stop. He was there, all right; he had made it without being seen or heard; but with less than six gallons of gas left, he would never get out of that mountain-cradled lake. No escape, no retreat—it was a locked fight now.

## CHAPTER XVIII

**A** LIGHT breeze blowing offshore began drifting the Fairchild out into the lake. Paul reached the two stubby paddles from the canvas canoe outfit, and the four men clambered down on the floats. By strenuous work they managed to check the drift and start the Fairchild in toward land.

It took them an hour to get the plane into the shallows where they could wade and push the ship. From there on it was easy.

A mile from the cabin Tenn-Og showed them a small cove, screened by several big pines, where the plane would be fairly well hidden. They warped it inside, moored it, got out their guns.

"You're to stay here and watch the ship," Curt ordered Smash. He hated to cut down his party, but Smash was too careless for the work ahead. Instead of a help he would be a constant danger. "Now keep yourself under cover; these Kloshees have sharp eyes and long ears. We'll scout the place out down there before we spring the fight, and I'll let you know what we're doing."

"Okay. Don't worry about me."

A little distance down the shore Curt happened to turn and glance back at the

cove. A match was flaring up—Smash lighting a cigarette. In the black pine shadows the point of fire could have been spotted half a mile away.

He stepped back, livid with anger. "You irresponsible baby, if you do a trick like that again, I'll hogtie you hand and foot and gag you! If you had to have a cigarette, why in hell couldn't you have lit your match? You've been around treat Smokies so much that you think these Kloshees are a joke. It'll be a damned sorry joke if they get the jump on us instead of us on them. When Paul and I've got a fight on our hands down there, you at least could show a speck of horse sense so we wouldn't have to watch after you, too. boot. I've warned you twice now; the third time I'm going to try something stronger."

He joined Paul and Tenn-Og again, and they slipped on down the shore. A pistol shot from the camp they crept out on a shelving rock where they had a good view.

A single candle shone in the cabin. Beyond it at the lean-to's glowed the red coals of a fire. Everything else about the place was dark and quiet.

Paul motioned at the camp. "Nobody's there but Karakhan and his four men, *compagnon*. Sonya hasn't come yet."

Curt nodded. Yes, thank God, he had got there in time. In spite of their attempt to get Ralph out, of the delay Smash had caused them, of their two hundred and forty mile flight through the twilight, they had providentially reached the lake ahead of her.

He stared at that candle gleam with a certain grim satisfaction. In actual sight now, the goal which he had set himself that night in Edmonton when he told A-K, "I'm going after Karakhan." The Cossack was his prisoner, if he chose to creep up and strike. The man was alone in the cabin, the four Kloshees were asleep or off guard; it would be ridiculously easy to slip up, brush the Indians aside and arrest or kill the man.

But Sonya was not there. To start trouble before she came would be gambling with her safety. If one of those four men should break away and take word to the party bringing her, that party would not come on and she would never reach the lake at all. She would be left in the power of LeNoir—and Siam-Klale. He had to hold off till she came. Tenn-Og said there

were only three men with her; and three more would not stiffen the fight too much.

Not long after they had crept out on the rock, they heard the pack of honey-colored huskies leave the camp and tear up along the landwash, barking. A little later they noticed a stir and bustle at the lean-to's. Figures passed in front of the fire, somebody quieted the dogs, the cabin door opened and an Indian was framed for a moment in the shaft of light.

"Somebody's come in," Curt told Paul. "It can't be Sonya and her party; she'd have gone inside the cabin and we'd have seen her. Let's slip closer and find out who it is."

Tenn-Og objected. The huskies would be sure to catch the white-man scent and stir up a commotion. He himself would go. He was Klososhee; the dogs would pay no attention to him.

Curt agreed, and Tenn-Og left.

As they watched the campfire and waited for him, Curt looked south in thought across those leagues of dark river and wondered how near Sonya was and what plan she had of getting back out of that country. More likely, in her usual headstrong fashion, she had never stopped to think about any such plan. His career as Intelligence head had taken him through many weird experiences but none stranger than this circumstance of Sonya and him both hunting Karakhan, stumbling across each other and traveling together for two weeks, and neither one of them letting the other know a whisper about their business.

From the references to Victoria in her letter, he knew that she had used her acquaintance with Karakhan to play on the Russian's weak point and that her letter had been a daring and superbly managed *coup* to find out exactly where he was. Considering the handicaps she'd been under—as a girl, without money or backing of any kind—her hunt was as brilliant a piece of work as he had ever encountered. Where he himself had counted on having to search for weeks or even months to locate the Cossack, she had achieved it neatly and swiftly, with three pages of paper; and Karakhan had actually sent his 'breed to fetch her!

In half an hour Tenn-Og reappeared. He had not only spied on the Klososhees at the fire, but had crept in beneath the cabin window and listened to the report three runners had brought Karakhan.

The main band, on their way north, had caught up with Sonya's party, were bringing her with them, and would reach the lake about dawn.

The news jolted Curt. He dared not make a move till Sonya came, but when she did come the main band would be there also. To get her back with him again and to capture Karakhan he would have to fight that whole party.

In low tones he and Paul talked their predicament over. There would be at least two dozen of the men; Siam-Klale and Le-Noir would be leading them. The prospect of a fight with them, a show-down fight, daunted both him and Paul; but there was no getting out of it now.

THEY decided to find some good ambush above the cabin, where they could sweep the camp with their rifles. They would have the advantage of surprise, and that would help considerably. Paul was to have the first two shots—at Siam-Klale and LeNoir. With his deadly marksmanship he would probably get them both before the fight really began. If he did, it would be half the battle. Without their leaders the rest of the band could likely be cowed and thrown into confusion by a hot rifle fire.

"There's one other thing," Curt added, "that I'm going to guard against now. When the rifle talk starts, Karakhan is dead sure to make a break for the hangar, to get into his plane and get away. If you fail to pick him off between the cabin and that plane shed, he'll be gone. We couldn't knock him out of the air without a machine gun, and with the gas we've got we couldn't follow him fifty miles. I'm going to swim down to that hangar and put his plane out of commission. Then we'll have him."

He stripped off his clothes, slipped into the water, headed out into the lake a short distance, and circled in toward the hangar.

Twenty strokes from the hangar he suddenly heard low guttural voices ahead. It stopped him short, just in time. In the darkness he could see the outlines of the building but could not locate the men at all except that they were near the plane shed.

Submerging himself, he swam closer, came up very cautiously, and raised his eyes above the surface of the water.

He was near enough then to see the men.

There were two of them. They were sitting on the ends of the catwalk, one on each side of the hangar entrance, with *narhkins* over their shoulders and their caribou spears propped against the walls beside them.

"Hell!" he swore. "Guards—watching the plane!"

Reluctantly he backed away and returned to the shelving rock.

"It doesn't matter," Paul assured him. "He can't get five steps from the cabin, and that hangar is a hundred yards away. If he makes a break, so much the better—it'll merely save us the trouble of arresting him and taking him out of this country."

They hurried back to the cove, ate a bit of food from the emergency rations in the Fairchild, and cleaned their guns carefully. Before leaving, Curt gave Smash his final orders.

"You're to stay here with the plane and keep under cover. Now here's what I want you to do. If anything happens to us—and I want you to wait till you're absolutely sure we're out of the picture—you hop into the Fairchild and get as far from here as the gas'll take you. Head for Fort Nelson on the Liard; it's nearer than Juneau or Russian Lake.

"When the gas runs out and you have to come down, get out the canvas canoe and try to make Fort Nelson. Follow down the water course you happen to be on; any of those streams'll take a person to the Liard. If you get to Nelson, borrow a motor-canoe from Bob Fraser, streak for the signal corps station at Providence, and wireless A-K. Tell him it was my request that he should send a big patrol in here and try to find Sonya Volkov."

**C**IRCLING up slope through the heavy timber, they headed for a cave which Tenn-Og had mentioned and which Curt thought might be a good place for an ambush.

The Indian's familiarity with the slope was amazing. He seemed to know every rock, canyon and dim trail on it. Eight hundred yards above the camp he turned and led them down toward the cabin till they came out on top of a high limestone cliff, cracked and seamed by the frosts of innumerable winters.

Without hesitating, even in the intense dark, the Indian took them down through a dangerous fissure, showing them hand-

holds and ledges where they saw nothing but blackness. At the foot of the cliff he turned left, led them a dozen steps along a game trail, and stopped at the wide black mouth of a cave.

Curt started to enter and look around, but Tenn-Og seized his arm and jerked him forcibly back. "*Hyas* bad place!" he warned, in stumbling Jargon. "You fall, fall down deep, no man ever see you any more. I take you in. Stay behind me, put hand on my shoulder."

About ten steps inside, the Indian stopped. With no danger of a light being seen, Curt struck a double match. Just in front of them yawned a black chasm, only fifteen feet wide but apparently bottomless. Across it stretched two logs, six-inch pines—a flimsy footbridge to the dark depths lying beyond. From somewhere down in the chasm came the gushing of water, a good-sized underground stream.

Before the match flickered out, Tenn-Og gestured that they were to cross the chasm. He stepped away and coolly *walked* across the logs. That was more than Curt cared to try. He got down and crept along the bridge on hands and knees, with Paul behind him. Midway he stopped, loosened a piece of bark and listened for the sound. Several seconds later he heard the bark hit against a rock and splash into the stream. The chasm, about seventy feet deep, was not so abysmal as he had thought; but for the man who fell into it those seventy feet would be plenty, with rocks to crash on and that underground creek to sweep one away.

Joining Tenn-Og on the other side, he lit another match and looked around. He found himself in a large irregularly shaped cave, warm and dry and fully fifty feet across. Shafts like the entrance led off in a dozen directions, some straight back into the mountain rock, others paralleling the face of the cliff. By the match flare he also noticed signs of human occupancy—a fireplace of blackened rocks; some stone utensils; a man's and a woman's pair of snowshoes against the wall, with the *babische* lacing eaten away by rock rats; a couch of woven balsam branches, the needles so old and sear that they crumbled to dust when he touched them with his moccasin.

In the flickering light he glanced at Tenn-Og, who was staring at the snowshoes and fireplace; and on the Indian's



face, usually so masklike, he saw a storm of emotions. The mystery of those signs, of Tenn-Og's familiarity with the cave and whole slope, suddenly cleared up for him. This was the place, the very cave, where Tenn-Og and the Sikanni girl had spent their idyllic summer and where Siam-Klale had found the girl and perpetrated his jealous brutality.

He laid his hand on the Indian's shoulder. "You've waited a long time, Tenn-Og," he said gently, in heartfelt pity. "But in a few hours from now we'll pay him back for that. It's only too bad that Paul, instead of you, is the one who'll kill him."

Paul picked up a balsam branch, touched it to Curt's match, and looked around the cave with marveling eyes. "Name of the Name!" he breathed. "Here you and I could hold off a hundred men!"

"Maybe so, but if they'd ever happen to bottle us up in here, we'd stay for a hundred years. I want something more substantial than that spider footlog between me and the outside. They could heave those two little timbers into the chasm, and we'd be here till doomsday."

Tenn-Og shook his head. "We get out. Hyas easy, quick." He pointed to one of the black shafts at their right and indicated that it opened out on a ledge near the fissure.

"But suppose they'd plug that opening up?" Curt asked.

The other Kloshees didn't know about it, Tenn-Og said. They knew about the cave, they often spent a night there or waited out a blizzard; but they knew nothing about the ledge opening. He and the girl had found it accidentally while exploring their home.

"In that case," Paul argued, "they couldn't trap us in here, *compagnon*. You and I, shooting from the entrance yonder, would have solid rock protection on all sides except in front. If something did go wrong, we could back up across this chasm, kick these logs down, and be safe against an army!"

But Curt was not satisfied. Leading the way back across the logs, he examined the cave mouth again. For defense the place was perfect, as Paul said. But defense was not enough. If they were to tear Sonya away and nail Karakhan, they would have to push the fight, and the cave did not look any too good for that. It was too far distant from the camp for sure rifle

work, and a drogue of spruces just down slope almost completely hid the cabin, lean-to's and lake shore. This last feature alone ruled out the cave as an ambush for them.

With the ghost of an idea in mind he stepped back again to the bridge, took hold of the ends of the logs, lifted them up, and assured himself that the two timbers could easily be thrown into the chasm. The cave certainly had the makings of a tremendous trap. If he could somehow get the Kloshees across into the cave proper and then push down the bridge, they would stay there till he got ready to let them out! Paul and Tenn-Og might draw them in by pretending to be desperately wounded. He himself could stay on the outside of the cave, and then, when they had got across the logs, he could jump in and spring the trap.

The idea intrigued him, largely because it would avoid heavy bloodshed. He hated to think of shooting into those men and killing as he would have to kill to stop a determined rush. They were Tenn-Og's people, they had wives and children waiting for them to return, and they were an admirable little clan. Besides, this fight was not their fight but Karakhan's, and the Russian would not be in that charge. He would be hiding behind others, letting others be victimized in protecting him.

As much as he wanted to try the trap, he finally decided against it. The idea seemed too flimsy. There were too many "if's" to it, the whole thing would have to be timed almost to a second; and if it failed, Karakhan would escape and Sonya would be whisked away and hidden. He preferred to put his trust in their original plan—and their rifles.

Back outside, he explained to Tenn-Og that the cave was no good, and asked him to show them a better place.

The Indian took them down slope fifty yards, worked over to the left and brought them to a little knoll. The spot looked ideal to Curt at his first glance. A tangle of rocks and windfall logs gave them fine cover; the slope fell away so steeply in front that an attack from that direction was impossible; and the upper side was protected by a thicket of devil's-club, spiked with wicked three-inch thorns. The range was as good as he could ask for, and down at the lake shore the whole camp lay wide open to their guns.

The stars had already paled and were

fading one by one. A faint pinkish light, gilding the tops of Sunali and Dinaggwah, changed to a flaming orange as the first direct shafts of the sun touched the pinnacle.

Down at the cabin a man, a white man, stepped out into the gray dawn, looked around and started down to the canoe landing. Curt's fingers tightened on his rifle as he watched the Russian. Helen Mathieson, the chapter at Buenos Aires, and all the episodes that he knew about in the man's twenty-year trail of crime flitted through his mind. He swore to himself that he was not going to arrest Karakhan and take him out *alive*. The most that a court could give him for that swindle was ten or twelve years, and some soft-headed pardon board would probably commute half of that. It would be a travesty on justice. The Cossack was going to resist arrest, and that would give them legal justification for ending his career abruptly.

At the lake headland to the east a canoe loomed out of the gray mist. Others followed it till presently ten were strung along the shore. One canoe nosed ahead of the others. In the prow of it Curt's aching eyes picked out a small slim figure sitting proudly erect, and his heart leaped. She'd come through safely! She was back under his protection again! What must her thoughts be—a mere girl, pitting herself against a vicious and dangerous criminal in a few minutes more, and then, if she killed him, finding herself at the mercy of LeNoir and the Black Grizzly, three hundred miles back in that savage country? In her wildest fancy she could not imagine that he and Paul were watching her at that moment, backing her up with their guns!

WITH rifle out at ready he watched the meeting between her and Karakhan, and saw them start up the path. He had planned to explode the fight before they went into the cabin, but circumstances forced him to hold off. LeNoir was out of sight behind a lean-to, and Siam-Klale's canoe was still a quarter-mile down the lake shore. Those two had to be killed with the first shots fired.

While he waited, fingering his rifle impatiently, he was suddenly startled by a throaty yelp from the direction of the cave. Jerking around, he saw five of the big honey-colored huskies filter out of a thicket and come loping straight for the knoll. Ranging up the mountainside on a hunt

of their own, the pack had struck the white man's scent and were running their quarry down.

Tenn-Og dropped the leader with a silent arrow, killing the dog in its tracks. His next arrow struck a husky in the flank. It yelped, whirled and bit at the dart. The others took the hint and stayed back a respectful distance, with a furious snarling and barking.

Down at the lean-to's several men grabbed spears and came rushing up the slope, thinking perhaps that the dogs had brought a prowling grizzly to bay. Still LeNoir did not show himself, and Siam-Klale was more than three hundred yards from the landing.

"Don't!" Curt whispered, as Paul lined his rifle at the sub-chief. "He's too far, and we've got to get that 'breed. We're sure to be discovered now, but before it happens we may put those two out."

The Kloshees, coming up the slope, ran upon the dead husky before it had stopped quivering in its death throes. One of them caught sight of the arrow piercing the dog, and excitedly pointed it out to the others. They stared at the husky, then turned their eyes to the knoll where the other dogs were circling and barking. With one accord they whirled, leaped back into the brush.

A long yell arose. It was taken up and echoed by those below. The Kloshees at the lean-to's seized their weapons and sprang to cover in a rocky ravine three rods to their left.

LeNoir started to follow them. Paul had only half a chance at him; the 'breed was running and was nearly hidden by some aspens; but Paul's bullet caught him and sent him rolling. He staggered to his feet again. As Paul drew another bead on him, two of the Kloshees leaped out and grabbed his arms and helped him toward the gully. It was so courageous an act that Paul refused to shoot again for fear of killing those two.

Down the shore Siam-Klale had swerved his canoe in toward the bank when the yell went up. Paul swung on him and emptied his rifle. He knocked the paddle from Siam-Klale's hands, smashed the middle thwart of the canoe and collapsed the boat, and burned the sub-chief till he yelped and leaped overboard, but the range was far too long even for Paul. Splashing through the shallows, Siam-Klale dived out of sight into a juniper clump.

At the cabin Karakhan appeared in the doorway to see what the commotion was about. Curt whipped up his rifle and shot. His bullet splintered the door frame, and sent the Cossack jumping back inside.

After that first pandemonium a silence fell. Curt saw nothing, heard nothing. The cabin, lean-to's and ravine were as still as death. The silence seemed to him the ominous quiet of a gathering storm. He hardly knew what to expect or what move to make next. The heartbreaking streak of luck—Siam-Klale hanging back, LeNoir keeping out of sight, the pack of huskies giving them away—had smashed all his careful plans to bits. The advantage of surprise was gone, they were thrown on the defensive; and now they were up against overwhelming odds, in a timber fight where the Kloshees were deadly.

Tenn-Og pointed down at the ravine. Thirty yards above the place where the Kloshees had jumped to cover, a pair of moosebirds were chattering raucously and hopping from tree to tree. Curt understood—Siam-Klale and the 'breed had got their men in hand and were bringing them up the deep brushy gully; and the birds were quarreling at them.

Tenn-Og pointed again, this time at the nearest crook of the ravine, which was only twenty-five yards from the knoll. His cryptic gesture meant that over so short a distance he and his two white friends could never stop two dozen men. They might kill six or seven, they might even get half the band; but the others would reach the knoll and spear them.

"We'd better get back to the cave," Paul warned.

Curt shook his head. If they did, the Kloshees would keep them penned up in there for hours. Karakhan would escape, Sonya would be taken away. In that wild country where Tenn-Og had hidden from his own clan for months, Paul and he would not stand one chance in ten thousand of finding her.

He hung on grimly, waiting for a break.

From tree to tree the moosebirds came closer. The Kloshees were coming slowly up the ravine, very slowly. He wondered why they were taking so much time about it.

Without warning, an arrow burned into the tangle and pinned his jacket sleeve to the log he was lying against. It came not from level range but from *above*. He

turned, looked up at the cliff. In a clump of buckbrush on top of the rock a bush swayed, a man's head and shoulders appeared for an instant. A second arrow came sizzling out of a different thicket up there and ricocheted off a rock between him and Paul.

It dawned on him that the Kloshees had out-manuevered and cornered them. While part of the band was coming slowly up the ravine, the others had circled out the slope and up on top of the cliff, to catch them between two fires and keep them from getting back to the numerous caves along the game trail.

He jerked up his rifle and shot at the buckbrush clump. A man leaped up, staggering blindly, took a step or two, plunged over the lip of the rock, struck once against the face of the cliff as he fell, and hit with a heavy thud on the boulders beneath.

Almost at that same instant a third arrow came hurtling down at Curt and hit the bolt of his rifle. Deflected downward, it struck his right hand that gripped the trigger guard, and sheared off his ring finger like a razor-edged chisel. He lifted his hand and stared blankly at the wound, unable to realize that his finger had been cut off, till the blood started spurting and darts of pain shot up his arm.

Some swift flashing object, whizzing down from the cliff-top like a tiny cart-wheel, caromed off a boulder, glanced sideways, and smashed Paul across the forehead. His rifle dropped from his hands, he went limp and sank over against a log. As Curt whirled to see how badly Paul had been hurt by the whizzing belt-ax, he caught a glimpse of Karakhan making a dash from his cabin to the hangar. It maddened him to know that the Cossack, the cause of all this fighting and death, was escaping. He forgot his wound, forgot Paul and the desperate plight they were in. Flipping the blood from his stinging hand, he rose up, pointed his rifle and took a careful aim at the scurrying figure.

**B**EFORE his finger squeezed the trigger, a sudden agonizing pain struck him in the right hip and nearly bowled him over. Giddy and faint from the shock, he looked down and saw an arrow buried head deep in his thigh.

He seized hold of the shaft and tried to pull the arrow out. The pain made the knoll and cliff and ravine go round and



round in a whirl, and for a moment he had to let go; but then he braced himself, shut his eyes, and gave a second, harder jerk, and the arrow came.

Paul had sat up and was groping for his rifle. Blood was streaming from his forehead, the gun wobbled in his shaky hands, he hardly knew where he was. From the cliff top the Kloshees were shouting to the others below that the two strangers were both wounded.

Curt grabbed Paul's shoulder and shook him. "Paul! We've got to make a break. They've got us, here. Pull yourself together. If we can get to the cave we might save ourselves."

He helped Paul to his feet, steadied him; and they started for the game trail. Tenn-Og led the way, tearing a path through the tangled brush. Behind them the Kloshees in the ravine poured out of their cover and came yelling up the slope, to overhaul and spear them. As he helped his stumbling partner along, Curt was aware of invisible things thudding into the trees around him, of those yells gaining on him, of seven or eight men pouring down through the fissure to cut them off. But they reached the foot of the cliff, hit into the trail and dashed out along it to the cave mouth.

"Get on back!" Curt cried to Tenn-Og, who had halted in the entrance. "We can't hold 'em off. All hell can't stop 'em!" They hurried Paul back to the bridge, and between them they got him across the logs to the cave. Curt whirled to pull the logs down and stop the Kloshees. In half a minute they would be pouring inside to finish off their wounded enemies. Neither he nor Paul could put up any fight. He himself was weak with pain and loss of blood; Paul was groggy, bleeding from the ax smash, and nearly blinded.

But as he stooped down and grasped the log ends, he thought of the consequences—the three of them cooped up in there for hours, Karakhan escaping, Sonya being snatched away and hidden. It was this last thought that stopped him. He could not sacrifice her in order to save himself.

He straightened up. "Tenn-Og! Take the lead. Get us out to that ledge opening. *Hyas* quick!"

The Indian seized his hand and started away into the inky blackness.

The next few minutes were a blind and aimless groping to him. Clutching Paul's arm, he followed on Tenn-Og's heels,

bumping against rock walls, lurching into sharp corners, stumbling over rock debris underfoot. He lost all sense of direction, of time. It seemed impossible anyone could find his way through all those turns in that Stygian darkness; but without once hesitating Tenn-Og led them on and on along the tortuous shaft till at last came a breath of cold moving air and a glimpse of daylight ahead.

On hands and knees they squeezed through a slit in the rock and came out on the ledge near the fissure.

Curt grasped a bush, leaned out and glanced back along the face of the cliff to the cave mouth. The ferns and dwarf birches hanging against the rock obscured his view, but he saw enough to know that most of the Kloshees had swept on inside. Only three or four men remained at the entrance.

He drew back. "They're in the cave, looking for us. Paul, stay here. You're too wobbly. Tenn-Og and I'll try to trap 'em."

They scrambled into the fissure and down to the game trail, and headed back to the cave mouth. With automatic drawn Curt rounded a jut and ran headlong into LeNoir, Siam-Klale and a third man.

The 'breed saw him first, and grabbed with his left hand for his belt-gun; but Curt's automatic cut him down and he toppled over, shot cleanly through the heart.

With a hoarse cry Tenn-Og sprang past Curt and flung himself bodily at the other two. The third man stabbed at him with a spear and tore the flesh in his arm. Tenn-Og grabbed the weapon, wrenched it away, and whirled on Siam-Klale. Perhaps in all his dreams of avenging his young wife he had never imagined that he would kill Siam-Klale at the very place and on the very spot where the sub-chief had so brutally disfigured her. But they were face to face there, with no one between them. Tenn-Og's arm went back, his body tautened like a steel spring, he lunged forward and drove the spear home with all the force of his long-cherished hate. The point struck Siam-Klale squarely in the breast, pierced him through and through, and stood out a foot on the other side. He tried to grapple with Tenn-Og, but his arms went limp, he staggered and fell backwards, and went rolling down the slope till he fetched up against a tree.

The third man dived like a scared marmot into the cave entrance, banging head-on against another man who had heard the shot and yell and was coming out. Curt sprang upon the two, smashed one of them with the butt of his automatic, jabbed the other with his elbow and kicked him aside, and reached the logs. Bracing his foot to keep himself from toppling, he lifted the logs, swung, and let go.

The two timbers fell away into the black depth, bumped once or twice against the chasm walls, struck with a splintering crash on the rocks below and splashed into the underground stream.

WHEN he got back outside, driving the two Kloshees at the point of his gun, he saw Tenn-Og standing down the slope, staring at Siam-Klale's body as though the end of his vengeance had left him dazed. Paul was stumbling along the game trail toward them, his face so covered with blood that he was hardly recognizable.

"Help me tie up these two, Paul," Curt panted. "They're the last of 'em! Those others back in there won't bother us any more!"

"You—you knocked the logs out?"

"Listen!" From the cave came yells of fear and terror as the Kloshees groped for the bridge and found it gone. "Does that sound as though I did?"

A caribou spear came hurtling out through the cave entrance. Paul and Curt hastily jumped aside. The pair of Kloshees took advantage of the moment's confusion, flashed around the jut and disappeared.

Down on the lake a motor started up with a spluttering roar. Curt's wounds, the quick desperate work of the last minute, and the smashing success of his trap, had made him forget about Karakhan, but the roar brought him alive. He turned, saw the plane glide out of the hangar and start lakeward. He and Paul both whipped up their rifles and emptied them at the ship; but it was moving too fast, careening too much; and they missed completely.

Curt threw down his gun. "Stay here, Paul, you and Tenn-Og! Watch for those two that broke away. They might come back and cause trouble. I'll stop him!"

"But how . . . You can't stop him!"

"I've got to! *I will!*"

He plunged down the slope, passed the

cabin without checking himself or even looking at it, swerved west along the lake shore, and headed for the cove at a dead run. The wound in his thigh pained till it sickened him; he breathed in gulps, and every stride jolted a gasp from his lips; but he shut his eyes against the pain and sickness and ran on. . . . Karakhan was getting away; out on the lake that plane was picking up air speed—

Two hundred yards from the cove he shouted ahead at Smash: "Start the engine! Revv it up for me!"

For once Smash came through. While Curt was reaching the cove, Smash cut the mooring ropes, clambered into the cabin, cranked the engine and pushed up the throttle, and had the motor settled into a steady powerful rhythm.

"Jump out!" Curt ordered him, splashing to a pontoon and clambering up. "I've got to go after him alone."

"But—but," Smash argued, "how're you going to—to— You can't fight him or follow him—"

"Get out! He's already in the air." He gave Smash a shove. "Jump, I tell you!" He grabbed his packchute from the rack, slipped into the harness and yanked the buckles tight.

Smash jumped into the hip-deep water, but turned, looked up.

"Curt! What're you going to do, man? What the devil—"

He was suddenly bowled over, deluged and half drowned in a blinding smother of spume and chopped-up water, as Curt opened the motor to its thundering roar and plowed out of the cove to the open lake.

For several minutes after Curt had left the cave mouth, Paul stayed there to watch for the two who had broken away. But he saw nothing of them, and decided that he was needed elsewhere.

"They're not coming back, Tenn-Og. At the rate they left, they could be on the Pacific Coast by tomorrow morning. You stay here. If you need help, yell for me."

Before leaving, he called in Sikanni to the men inside the cave: "Things of infamy, you will come out when we say come out! If you are peaceful, you will see the sunshine again. If not, you can stay there till this mountain wears away!"

He started down the slope to the cabin. On his way past the gully, he stopped at

a pool of water and washed the blood from his face.

From the door of the cabin he saw Sonya lying bound and gagged on the bunk. She turned her head, saw him and tried to rise, but Karakhan had bound her too securely. Paul ran across to her. As he bent over her and she looked up at him, the expression in her eyes was a thing he could never afterward forget. From the depths of hopeless despair the mere sight of him lifted her to the heights.

When he cut her loose she sprang up and hugged him, sobbing: "Paul! Paul! Oh, I knew—I heard the shooting—I knew you had come! *Where's Curt?* Is he—is he safe?"

In a few words Paul explained. "Tenn-Og brought us north, we flew in last night, we've just whipped the Kloshees. Those planes, hear them—" the two ships out on the lake were jarring the cabin with their full-gunned roar—"that's Curt going after Karakhan. *Allons!*"

They ran out of the cabin to the open landwash.

Heavy with gas, Karakhan's plane had got off the water and climbed to a thousand feet, and was circling for altitude to clear the ranges. Curt was just jumping his ship into the air as they came out.

Lighter and swifter than the other plane, it climbed in a steep thundering spiral, cutting down Karakhan's lead so rapidly that in four minutes it was up level with the Speedair.

In bewildered awe Paul and Sonya stood on the shore, faces upturned, watching the two ships circle and climb, circle and climb—maneuvering around each other like great hawks.

"What's Curt going to do, Paul?" Sonya cried.

Paul shook his head, utterly nonplussed. His partner had gas for only a few miles and could not follow; he had no gun except an automatic, and could not fight. His maneuvers were utterly mystifying. He was not even trying to close up, where he might have got in a lucky shot with the pocket gun; instead he was deliberately keeping at a distance from Karakhan.

AT four thousand feet Karakhan leveled off and swung due south. Curt was behind him at that moment, and about five hundred feet above. As the Speedair swung, Curt's ship nosed down and headed

for the other plane, straight as a fluted arrow. To the spellbound watchers it seemed as though Curt meant to smash headlong into the other ship in mid-air. They held their breath, expecting him every instant to veer aside. But he did not veer. He hurtled on and on, aiming his craft like a huge projectile at Karakhan's plane. The interval shrank—two hundred feet, a hundred, fifty. Still he did not turn or swerve an inch. Sonya screamed. He was going to crash! *He was crashing!* . . . With an explosive smash that came to them distinctly, the Fairchild plowed into the other ship, breaking the Speedair's fuselage in two and tearing off both wings. Careening on beyond the Speedair, Curt's plane turned over twice, with its own pontoons and one of its wings gone; and started a crazy lurching spin to the lake below.

Karakhan's ship, a tangle of fabric and metal, came plummeting straight down. A few seconds after the crash a puff of fire-shot smoke streamed out behind it, and within a thousand feet the whole mass was wrapped in fierce flames.

But Paul and Sonya scarcely saw it. Their horrified eyes were on Curt's broken plane as it twirled downward at a terrific speed, its propeller gone, its engine roar changed to a high-pitched scream.

At two thousand feet a small manikin object detached itself from the falling wreckage. For five or six seconds it came down and down, turning slowly, head over feet, till the demolished Fairchild was a hundred yards below it and well to one side. Against the blue of the sky a tiny bit of white flashed. A moment later a long streamer of white shot out. While the two wrecked craft were plummeting on down, to hit the lake with a tremendous splash and sink out of sight, the streamer caught the air, flared out and burst into a white sky-flower.

"*Oh-oo!*" broke from both of them—a cry of unwordable thankfulness, releasing all their spellbound fears of those last terrible minutes. Even then they could not fully realize that Curt had saved himself. It came home to them only by degrees, as they watched the packchute stop swinging and drift in their direction.

It was Sonya who first saw Curt tugging at the guide lines and understood the danger he was fighting against.

"Paul! Get a canoe! He'll come down



in the lake! We've got to get out to him!"

Paul sprang back the path to a canoe near the cabin. By the time he got it to water, he saw that the craft would not be needed; the wind was carrying the 'chute south against the mountain slope. Four hundred feet high it passed over their heads, and Curt looked down and waved assurance to them. Falling slowly, he brushed low over a clump of spruces and lodged in a tall pine just above the little knoll.

Paul hurried up to help his partner, but Sonya could not move. When she saw that Curt had landed and was safe, she sank down on the canoe, faint and trembling. A wing of Karakhan's plane was bobbing in toward shore, but the ship itself had disappeared, and Karakhan with it—down in the icy depths of the lake. As her eyes followed that piece of bobbing wreckage, she strove to realize that he was dead, dead—the man who had cruelly sent her father and Carl to their innocent deaths. Her long hunt was ended. Not by her hand, as she had thought and prayed, but by the hand of another, for where her own venture had failed, Curt's awful gamble had swept Igor Karakhan into oblivion.

## CHAPTER XIX

AT Russian Lake old John came walking into the fireglow of Curt's camp, where Curt sat talking with Superintendent Marlin who had flown up from Vancouver that afternoon.

"I'm havin' a leetle git-together over at my tent dreckly, like we had that time afore, Curt; an' I figgered you men 'u'd like to j'in us. Paul an' Tenn-Og an' some more air there a'ready, an' the others all said they're comin'."

"Thanks, John, we'll be over," Curt accepted. "Our trip really started there at your fire, and it ought to end there."

When old Paxton had gone, Marlin handed Curt another newspaper. "Here's the *Times-Tribune*. You drew headlines and first page. Well, this is once that we'll welcome all the publicity they can give us. I guess a lot of people are changing their minds, Curt, about a man with a million being immune to justice. Read this."

The streaming headline

### KARAKHAN TAKEN BY FORMER MOUNTY

brought Curt a glow of hard-earned pride; but he was more gratified by the sub-head, with its emphasis on Karakhan's money:

#### Embezzler of Huge Sums Killed in Resisting Arrest

As he skimmed down the double-column account, he imagined the scores of papers carrying that same story, its reverberations throughout the western provinces, and the lesson it was driving home to countless people.

The Karakhan hunt had cost him a heavy price personally—his maimed hand, his brushes with death, the suffering it had dragged him through, and the destruction of his Fairchild which he had bought with the savings of several years. As pay for all that he was to receive less than two hundred dollars. But the hunt had gained him certain priceless things, not to be measured in money. He and A-K were back on the old footing again; he had found himself after a year of groping around, and he had found Sonya. . . . He laid the paper and stack of others inside the tent. "I suppose we'd better start over to old John's 'sociable,' A-K. You'll be the guest of honor there tonight, and they're probably waiting."

Marlin did not get up. In a moody silence he looked out upon the twilight lake, drumming absently on the chopping block. Curt knew something was troubling him deeply. He had been noticing it ever since the old officer arrived six hours ago.

"What is it, A-K?" he asked.

Marlin turned to him with a resolute air. "I might as well get it over with, I suppose. She, I mean Rosalie, told me to break you the news. I should have, before now, but it's a dismal duty."

In a flash Curt guessed the trouble. Rosalie had landed a more suitable candidate than himself! One of the dozen claims she had been holding had come through, and she had broken off their engagement. He wondered sardonically whether the gentleman was the Edmonton banker or the Seattle ship owner.

"I believe I know what you're going to tell me, A-K." For Marlin's sake he hid his sheer delight over the unexpected good news. "Rosalie came to the conclusion that she and I just weren't suited for each other, and so she—"

"You're being generous," Marlin interrupted, more sharply than he had ever before spoken of Rosalie. "The conclusion she came to was that she wanted to marry money; and she went after it, and—well, she got it, got a whole steamship line! She's satisfied, I suppose; but Lord! he's old enough to be—he's actually got a son three years older than she is. I tried to head it off. I was hoping to the last that she and you . . . But I guess it wasn't to be." He made a weary gesture and stood up. "Well, you know now. I don't think it's altogether a surprise to you. Nor," he added pointedly, "very much of a disappointment."

"No, it isn't," Curt admitted honestly. "I was intending to have a frank talk with her when I was in the city a month ago, but she wasn't there."

When they went out to old John's camp, the company had already gathered. Father Lespérance had torn himself away from his studies; Higginbotham had come down and was beaming genially at everyone; Corporal Hodkins, awkward and scared in the presence of his division commander, had put in his appearance, looking more regimental than he had in years. On the packing box Sonya sat talking with Mrs. Hodkins and Paul and a *métisse* girl. The Indians and *métis* and prospectors were there, and the young trapper had brought his two wolf cubs, still fuzzy and playful but now grown too big for his pocket.

One person of that former evening was missing, though; and Curt felt the loss keenly. As his glance occasionally met Sonya's across the fire, he knew that she too was thinking of Ralph Nichols and a lonely lobster up the Lilluar.

Like some wild creature brought in from the mountains, Tenn-Og hung back at the edge of the fireglow, trying to understand all those strange tongues and strange people of the outer world. After an exile of one hundred and twenty years, a Kloshee had returned at last to the ancestral home of his tribe.

Curt felt a proprietary interest in that proud little band which had fought him so fiercely. They were *his* clan, and he wanted to give them a helping hand and some desperately needed counsel. Even in that isolated country they could no longer hold out against a changing world. They would have to yield at certain points or go down. Unless he beat the Indian Bureau

to them, they were doomed to a reservation or the unsympathetic rule of some agent.

It was a long while before the trout and oolichan were browned to a turn and old John passed out his birchbark platters. After that interruption the talking and yarn-spinning started again and flowed on steadily. The company showed no signs of breaking up for hours yet. Curt noticed how tired Sonya was, too tired to talk or even listen to the others. The long trip out of the Lilluars, ended only yesterday, had been hard on her; he himself still felt logy from it.

A LITTLE before midnight she looked across at him with an understanding glance, excused herself and went up toward the factor's house.

After a decent interval he got up and left, as inconspicuously as possible. In the moon shadows of the trading post he found her, waiting for him.

"You were so long, dear," she whispered, "I thought you weren't coming."

Curt disarmed her with a kiss. "I had to wait several minutes, and then I swung out around the Indian tepees so those folk wouldn't know I'd followed you."

He linked his arm through hers and they started out the path toward the old *ostrog*.

"Does A-K still think I'm an adventuress, Curt?"

"When I told him how you trailed Karakhan, he wanted to sign you up for the Mounted."

"Oh, that'd be fun! I think I'll do it."

"You *will* not! You're going to cast your lot with the Provincial Police."

She mused: "Commissioner, wife of the Provincial Commissioner—that's an awfully high position for me to live up to, Curt. I don't know whether I can make good at it or not."

"But think of what I'll have to live up to, sweet. Look"—he took her hand and laid it upon his own, her slender tapering fingers upon his rough calloused ones. "Blue-blood and commoner! The daughter of Prince Stephn Volkov, and an erstwhile prospector and wolf hunter! Tell me, Lady Sonya, is it really true that day after tomorrow, in Victoria, you'll be Sonya Tennyson?"

"Don't!" Sonya stopped him. She raised his hand to her lips. "This hand fought for me, and was wounded; and red blood is better than blue. Do you remem-

ber"—they were passing Curt's tent—"remember the evening when I came by here and Paul said 'Bon soir' to me? I didn't know you were in the tent or even that you existed. Six weeks ago—it doesn't seem possible, Curt."

"We crowded years into those six weeks. But I saw you go by. I was watching through the flap-front. And something told me I was turning a corner of my life that evening."

They went past the *ostrog* and walked on along the lake shore. A thousand yards from the post they sat down on a lichen-covered rock near the wave edge. Sonya nestled against him, her tired head against his shoulder.

She was motionless and silent so long that he believed she must have dropped off to sleep, but when he glanced down he saw that she was looking up at him, studying him.

"You're sorry, aren't you, Curt?"

"Sorry—for what, dear?"

"That we're not going to live in a country like this. That we're going back to the cities."

"No, I'm not," he denied, astonished that she should have guessed the very thing which had been running through his mind for the last several minutes.

"But you are, Curt." She took his face between her hands and made him look at her. "You feel I want you to, you feel it's the right thing; but still you're sorry."

"I am, a little," he admitted. "I can't help being, dear. But my place is down there. You helped me see that. And besides, we'll have all this summer for our honeymoon in the Lilluars. Think of you and me and Paul having three golden months in those ranges, with Tenn-Og and his people. It'll be a memory to live on for a long time. I'm being honest with you, Sonya—I don't want to go back down north. This work I'm taking on is a responsible position, and I'm egoist enough to believe that eventually I'll climb on past it."

She was reassured by his words.

In the distance he could see the ruddy glow of old John's campfire and the twinkle of figures passing back and forth in front of it. A night wind rustling in the woods behind brought him the purl of an overfalls and the sad song of the pines.

When he glanced down at Sonya again, long minutes later, he saw that her eyes

were closed. He did not stir, or wake her; it was too precious to have her asleep in his arms. She seemed so different at heart from what she had been on their trip north—more cheerful and at peace. With the death of Karakhan a black load had fallen away from her.

He marveled at the strange destiny which had brought her to him—from the Volga of old Russia, across Siberia, China, Canada, to this northern wilderness where he and she had met. It awed him to realize that she had no friend or relative in the world now save himself and that her happiness depended so completely upon him. Life had cruelly battered and tossed her—first with the loss of mother, home and country, then with the penniless destitution of the Volkovs in Canada, then with the crushing death of her father and brother. Now she was utterly alone except for him, an alien girl in an alien land. He would have to see that life began making up to her for those twelve tragic years.

FAR away across the lake a wolf lifted its wailing crescendo, its voice laden with the loneliness and savagery and beauty of the Northland. He would miss all that, Curt thought sorrowfully—the Arctic prairies, the Nahanni Mountains, the happy freedom which had been his for a year and which he would put behind him irrevocably that fall. It seemed to him that when he had sent his plane crashing into Karakhan's ship, it had been like folding up his wings and bidding good-bye to adventure. From the very beginning of the Karakhan hunt intangible bonds had been tightening upon him little by little, drawing him back to his destined course of life.

But he did not feel that he was leaving the wilderness for good and all. They could come back to it, he and Sonya, and live for a while in it. There would be times when they would need to come back—to keep their perspective and get a new hold on their strength. What if he did regret the musk-ox prairies and the white-wolf hills? One could not have everything. He felt, as he smoothed a wisp of hair from Sonya's cheek, that he had received his full share, and more. He had health and courage, and a position that challenged all his powers, and the vista of still more challenging heights toward which he and Sonya could climb together.



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# The Mercy of the Law

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD



**J**ACK McVEIGH, of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, crouched low behind his little hummock of ice and snow, mentally figuring how much longer his numbed fingers could load his rifle at fifty degrees below zero. As he figured, and thrust the last of five cartridges into the chamber, a little white puff of smoke rose from another ice-hummock three hundred yards down the ridge, and at the nerve-racking whine of a bullet close over his head McVeigh ducked. His body was half burrowed in the crust and snow. About him were scattered ten empty cartridges, where they had been thrown by the ejector. With a grimace on his face—the grimace of a man who momentarily expects a bullet to smash squarely between his eyes—he raised himself slowly until he looked through the furrow he had made with his gun-barrel. For an instant his eyes peered

over the top of the snow-hummock. Straight ahead of him was Bob Carter, the man he was after. On their left rose the snow-smothered ridge. To their right was the Barren, with its stunted scrub. Five or six miles away was the dark fringe of timber along the Coppermine. Yesterday McVeigh had reckoned that he was as near the Arctic Circle as he cared to be, with the temperature at fifty below, and a mass of black sky rolling down from the north. That sky was thicker and blacker now, and out of it there came the low wailing that precedes Arctic storm. It was a terrifying and ominous sound, and increased the cold in McVeigh's veins. But he was not afraid. He was thirty-five, and for ten years he had hunted men. Five of those years had been spent north of Fifty-three. He set his teeth, and took a pot-shot at Carter.

Behind his hummock Carter, the outlaw, lay flat on his face. He did not look like an outlaw. He was older than McVeigh by a year or two. The eyes that peered through the furrow he had made in his bulwark were blue. His hair was long, and blond. Outwardly he was the sort of man another would like to meet in the loneliness of a desolation four hundred miles from civilization. There was something companionable about him, even as he heard the dull chug of McVeigh's bullet under him.

He chuckled aloud as he poked his rifle barrel along the furrow.

"Mighty good thing this snow covers a rock," he told himself. "If it wasn't for that you'd 'a' pinked me half a dozen times, old man. You're sure shootin' to kill, an' if I don't get a chance to wing you pretty soon I'll have to let fly at you for fair. But I don't want to hurt you—BAD!"

He fired, and flattened himself again.

Behind his hummock McVeigh, the man-hunter, gave an exclamation of disgust.

"Damn!" he ejaculated. "I'll swear I've bull's-eyed that hummock four times out of five! I wonder—"

A handful of snow flew into his face, and a bullet screeched so near that in spite of himself a low cry broke from his lips. His jaws set tensely.

"He's getting the range," he muttered. "Something's got to happen—soon. My Gawd, but it's cold!"

Slowly there rose above the distant mound an object that stood out stark black against the white behind it. With a swift intake of his breath McVeigh sighted for it, and fired. The dark object disappeared. McVeigh's frost-nipped face had turned a shade whiter.

"I hated to do it," he gasped. "I hated to!"

Behind his snow-covered rock Carter was looking at a hole in his fisher-cat cap, and there was an unpleasant smile on his face.

"Now where the devil would YOU have been, Bob Carter—if your head 'ad been in the cap?" he asked himself. There was a new glitter in his eyes as he poked his rifle along the furrow. "I ain't shot to kill—yet," he said, speaking straight at the man-hunter. "But I guess it's time. I ain't a murderer. Don't believe I'm even bad—not VERY bad. Couldn't be—an' live for three years with an angel like HER.

So I'm going to pink you, old man. Don't like to—but I must. Seems to me she's tellin' me to do it!"

More than once he had struck down a running fox at three hundred yards. Now he centered the distant snow-hummock, and in the same instant McVeigh rose from behind his shelter, a clear target against the gray sky behind him. Carter did not fire again. He watched McVeigh as he staggered half a dozen paces from the hummock, and fell face downward in the snow. Then he rose from behind his own shelter and ran swiftly toward his fallen foe.

WHEN McVeigh opened his eyes he was in a cabin. He was flat on his back, and stripped. His first sensation was one of utter helplessness. Then he moved, and gave a groan of pain. Carter's face appeared over him instantly, and with its appearance everything flashed upon Jack McVeigh. Carter had got him. But he wasn't dead, he wasn't particularly uncomfortable, and Carter didn't look murderous. There was a smile of approbation in the outlaw's eyes as he looked down into McVeigh's face.

"Thought you wouldn't kick the bucket that easy," he said. "If I'd used a soft-nosed bullet there wouldn't be much of you left, but I used the steel-points on purpose not to hurt you bad if it was only a wing shot. You've got a hole clean through your shoulder, an' your arm's broke. Funny how you got an arm in front of that bullet. But you ain't hurt bad, an' I've got you spliced up as good as 'most any doctor could fix you. How you feelin'?"

"Fine!" said McVeigh with a grimace, and lapsed off into semi-consciousness again.

Carter went coolly about his work of making a rabbit pot-stew over the sheet iron stove. For some time after coming to himself again McVeigh looked about him without apprising Carter of his improved condition. His head was bolstered up, and his brain became quite clear. His right arm was bandaged so tightly that it felt like a stick, and there was a burning sensation in his shoulder. Otherwise everything about himself appeared to be so normal that he was sure he could stand on his feet without much effort.

The first thing that struck him, after he had looked hard at Carter, was the unusualness of the cabin he was in. He could



not remember of having seen another cabin just like this anywhere north of Fort o' God or Nelson House. Every corner and every wall of it spoke of a woman's presence. He knew of only two white women who lived north of Fort Churchill, but he was sure that it was a white woman who lived here. The first of the strange things that had caught his eyes was a diminutive, old-fashioned melodeon, with a row of ivory keys yellowed by age. There were pictures on the walls, clean white muslin curtains at the two windows, and, to his astonishment, he found that he was lying between WHITE SHEETS. And then he saw a pair of shoes on the floor—not moccasins, or shoe-packs, or buckskin lac-flips—but SHOES—the first he had seen in almost a year!

He leaned over, and stared at them. They were a woman's shoes, and from heel to toe they were no longer than his hand. When he dropped back, Carter was looking at him.

"You married?" he asked, looking the outlaw straight in the eyes.

Carter had stooped to pick up the shoes. In his big strong hands he held them with a tenderness that was almost worshipful. He nodded.

"She forgot these," he said. "I sent her south—down to folks we've got in Montreal—when I heard you fellows were on my trail again. She hasn't guessed why I almost forced her to go. You see, when I heard you fellows 'ad dug up old accounts, an' was after me again, I figgered something unpleasant might happen. You understand—she don't know." He placed the shoes on a stool, and bent over the stove again. "Feel like takin' your stew now?" he asked.

With an effort McVeigh pulled himself on his good elbow, and then sat up.

"I'll get up," he said. "Have you got a—a—anything for me to put on?"

Carter brought him a clean blue shirt and his trousers. He chuckled as he helped McVeigh put on the garments, and then assisted him to his feet. They sat down at a table, spread with a red cloth, and Carter began dishing out the stew. McVeigh, looking at him closely, noted the hungry look in his eyes. The outlaw ate as if famished. McVeigh had taken no food since morning, and it was now late afternoon. His appetite was unimpaired by his injury, and between them they cleaned up

the rabbit stew and a full-sized bannock. When they had finished, Carter brought McVeigh his pipe, and they smoked.

"I didn't know you was married," said McVeigh. "The report didn't say anything about that."

"Pretty bad report, wasn't it?" asked Carter.

McVeigh nodded.

"It said you shot up a man, nine years ago, down in a lumber camp on the Pigeon."

A hard glitter came into Carter's eyes.

"That's true," he said.

"And, you know," went on McVeigh, a thrill of pride in his voice, "The Royal Mounted doesn't forget—and Canadian Law never outlaws itself. It happened nine years ago, and for years we lost track of you, but—"

"You think you're going to get me at last," added Carter.

"Sure."

Carter thumbed down the tobacco in his pipe bowl, and to the glitter in his eyes there was added an unpleasant tightening of his jaws.

"How?" he asked quietly. "Do YOU expect to get me?"

"That depends," replied McVeigh. "I've been in this game of man-hunting for ten years, and I've seen stranger things happen. I think probably—if you don't take advantage of my present helplessness and kill me—that I will get you within the next four or five months."

His eyes met Carter's squarely. They were the eyes of a strong man, and a fighter. And then he added, as mildly as though speaking to a friend:

"Of course, it all depends on what you're going to do with me, Carter. If you put me out of the game entirely it'll be up to someone else to run you down."

THE gleam had gone from Carter's eyes, and he chuckled in his peculiar way as he offered McVeigh fresh tobacco.

"I don't mind telling you what I'm going to do, old man," he said pleasantly. "This cabin is sixty miles from the nearest post, and you won't be able to travel for two weeks at the best. So I'm going to leave you in the morning. There's plenty of grub here, an' you'll be mighty comfortable. Meanwhile yours truly will be hikin' it southward, an' by the time you get in a report the little girl and I'll be emigratin'.

Isn't that a pretty reason'ble program?"

"I'm worse'n a damn sourdough," growled McVeigh. "I should 'a' pinked you half a dozen times at that three hundred yards. Such rotten shootin'—"

"It wasn't so rotten, after all," interrupted Carter. "You'd 'a' got me six times anyway—if I hadn't been behind a rock. You shot to kill—bein' a good, tender-hearted, law-abidin' citizen. I DIDN'T. When I made up my mind I had to get you it took just one shot to do the business. You put a hole clean through the cap I held above the rock. I guess you wanted me—BAD."

In the gathering darkness McVeigh flushed at the low taunt in Carter's voice. The gloom of Arctic night had fallen swiftly and the outlaw rose and lighted a lamp.

"I don't remember that the report said how YOU got YOUR man," said McVeigh suggestively, as Carter opened the stove door to put in a chunk of wood.

The fire flashed red in Carter's face. He closed the stove door, and stood up straight.

"I'll tell you how," he said.

And there was passion in his voice.

"That hound—Teazell—made life a hell for me then, and he's made it a hell for me ever since—by keeping you human dogs on my trail. I came up to the Pigeon lumber camps straight from teaching school in an Ohio village. I was almost dead with lung trouble, and didn't weigh much more than a half what I do now. That devil took a dislike to me. He was the bully of the camp. He dogged me, he beat me up a dozen times, but my pride kept me from running away. Then—that day—it happened when I met him and his brother alone on the trail. I don't know—can't understand—why he hated me so. That day he almost killed me. I was on my back, his hands at my throat—and everything was growing black when I drew a revolver I carried and shot him. It was a self-action, and I shot him three times before he let go of my throat. He would have killed me. I shot in self-defense. I killed him—as I would kill him again under the same circumstances. But his brother was the only witness—and he lied. I got away, and I've been hiding in the north ever since. And for THAT you and the rest of your man-hunting tribe want to see me swing at the end of a rope. Gawd, what a beast the Law can be!"

He went out to the cabin door, and opened it. Outside it was dark. A cutting wind was whining over the Barren. The deeper rumble of it, like that distant roar of surf, was growing nearer.

McVeigh came to Carter's side and looked over his shoulder.

"We're goin' to have a devil of a storm!" he said.

Fifteen minutes later they were listening to the moaning sweep of it over the cabin. Carter had been talking. The over-heated stove reflected a red glow in his face. His eyes shone. McVeigh had let his pipe go out.

Carter went on.

"Gawd—I'll never forget that day I saw her first, three years ago last September," he said. "I was down at Fort o' God then, making ready to guide a hunting party that was coming up. I was mending a canoe on the river shore, and it wasn't more'n seven o'clock—with the sun just coming up over the forest. I heard a sound, 'n' looked up. An' there she was, facin' the sun—an' as I looked she loosened all that glorious hair of hers an' tossed it loose about her, burnin' like red an' gold piles of—of—GLORY—in the sunlight. She was 'airing' it, she told me afterward, and she's done that same thing every morning for the last three years, sunshine or storm. She didn't see me then, an' when at last she turned and found me looking at her it was all in a moment as if you'd crushed a lot of flowers in her cheeks—and then she turned and ran away from me as if I'd frightened her to death."

Carter was not looking at McVeigh now. There was in his face the look of a man who was seeing a vision of paradise. His face had softened. He laughed, and his voice was low and exultant—exultant with the joy of possession and of love—as he went on.

"She had come up with her uncle from Montreal. They were going to hunt, and wanted a guide. I became that guide. I've had faith in God ever since then—even though I've killed a man. I've had faith in Him, because all that happened was a miracle. I worshipped her, an' the day I found out she loved me I knelt down in the woods, all by myself, an' cried like a baby. She said it was God that brought her into the forests an' made her meet me. She loved the wild things as I've never seen a woman love 'em before—the trees, the lakes, the

rivers, even the snow an' storms. We were married before her uncle went back, an' she's been happier every day since then, an' she's grown more 'n' more beautiful, an'—an'—"

HE was not speaking to McVeigh now. He was looking straight through the log wall of the cabin, through the black night, and what he saw put a strange thrill in his voice.

"An' we're goin' to have—a family—in the spring," he finished. "That was my excuse—for sendin' her down to Montreal. I'm prayin' it's a girl, like HER—an' she's prayin' it's a boy, like ME."

McVeigh struck a match, and Carter started, as if awakened out of a half dream. He laughed, and his face flushed red.

"Now what the devil have I told you all that for?" he demanded; and the hard tone came back into his voice. "But sometimes I say those things all to myself, so don't suspicion I've told you about her to work on your sympathy. Why, when a man's got an angel like HER back of him he don't need sympathy, he don't need anything but fights—an' he'll win 'em all. Because when a man's got a wife like her he stands right next to Gawd A'mighty. I felt that way when you was sniping at me behind the rock, and every time I heard a bullet go CHUG I thought 'She an' her God put this rock under the snow-crust.' Look here—"

He rose and went to the side of the room, where a box was nailed upright to the log wall, and covered with a muslin curtain. As he drew back the curtain he looked at McVeigh, his eyes shining with pride.

"Books," he said. "Her books."

McVeigh rose with a grimace of pain, and went to his side. There were a score of books on the shelves that Carter had placed in the box—finger-marked, worn, and patched. One by one Carter took them out, and handled them fondly.

"She's read 'em aloud to me—every one," he said. "Most of 'em she's read twice or three times, an' this one we almost know by heart. We have fun seein' who can say the most of it, without looking at the pages. She beats me out every time."

He gave the book to McVeigh. McVeigh coughed, and then laughed.

"The Bible," he grunted. "It MUST be fun."

"It is," replied Carter softly. "It is—

when you're learnin' it WITH HER."

He turned over one of the frayed and worn pages, and placed a forefinger on a couple of verses written in a woman's hand.

"She wrote that," he explained. "It's goin' to be the kid's first prayer."

His back was to McVeigh as he replaced the book in its place on the shelf. McVeigh leaned over, and saw something else.

Carter turned in time to catch the enquiry in his face. He had dropped the curtain, but drew it aside again, and took out that which McVeigh had seen.

"It's her picture—my wife," he said.

McVeigh turned to the light, and his face was away from Carter as he looked at the photograph. It was a wondrously sweet face in the picture. It looked straight at him, and in the pure, deep eyes there was a glow of life that sent a strange thrill through him. He did not reveal its effect as he returned the picture to Carter.

A blast of the storm swept loudly over the cabin. McVeigh shivered, and laughed, and there was something unnatural in the tone of his voice when he spoke.

"By the sound of that I guess mebbey you'll have to put off that trip you was goin' to begin in the morning, won't you, Carter?" he asked.

For a moment the eyes of the two men met. Carter smiled as he seated himself opposite the man-hunter.

"The storm won't stop me," he said. "I've got six good huskies and a sledge, and we'll strike the shelter of heavier timber twenty miles to the south. It ain't very polite to leave you in this way, McVeigh, but I've got to do it."

"I'd like to wager that you don't get through," said McVeigh, leaning over until his face was in shadow. "They're lookin' close for you all the way between Churchill and Nelson House. They've got an idea you'll try to slip out, and that you'll surely hit the old trails if you do. It'll go even worse with you now, after sending this bullet through me."

Carter rose and stretched himself.

"Let's not talk about unpleasant things," he said. He looked critically into the man-hunter's eyes. "You'd better go to bed or you'll have fever in the morning," he advised. "And don't go sleep-walkin' around looking for guns during the night. I've cached 'em all—except this—and I'll have this handy, an' I don't sleep very sound." He let McVeigh see the cold glitter of a



Savage automatic, and then smoothed out the blankets in the bunk.

McVeigh crawled in, and Carter turned down the light. For a long time he sat near the stove, smoking. Outside the storm swept over the cabin with greater violence, and now and then when there came a lull in the fierce sweep of it across the Barren, Carter prayed each time that the worst of it was over. But even if it continued until morning, and through the next day, he had made up his mind to begin his flight southward with dawn. The thought that he was going, that McVeigh had changed all his plans, and that within a few weeks he would again be with the woman he loved, robbed him of all desire for sleep. His plans had come quickly, and they seemed so perfect that he wondered why he had never thought of them before. He would be in Montreal almost before McVeigh could take word of his escape to Churchill, and before that word could follow him to civilization he and Isobel could be in almost any part of the world they chose. An hour or two later he began to gather the few necessities for his pack, believing that McVeigh was asleep. But the man-hunter was awake. Through half-closed eyes he watched Carter. The last things that he saw him put into the pack were two or three books, and the shoes. He was sure that one of the books was the Bible in which the woman had written a prayer.

McVeigh had been sound asleep when Carter roused him in the morning. He sat up with a grunt of pain, and the outlaw helped him to his feet. It was quiet outside. McVeigh knew without questioning that the storm was at an end. Carter's pack was ready in the middle of the floor, with his snowshoes lying beside it. Breakfast was steaming on the stove.

"Sorry to wake you," apologized Carter, "but I want to dress that shoulder again before I go." He put a stool near the stove for McVeigh, and went to work. He chuckled when he unwrapped the bandage and saw the wound.

"Fine," he said. "A doctor couldn't have brought it around better! Does it hurt?"

"Not much," replied McVeigh. "The warm water feels good."

AS Carter bathed the wound, he said, "Funny things—human beings are, ain't they? Seems as though we all ought

to be friends, an' yet most of us are enemies—just like a lot of buzzards, every one of us watchin' for some other poor cuss to make a misstep. Then we're down on 'im like grim death, an' chuck 'im in jail, or murder 'im with electricity, or break his neck with a rope. Now—right this minute—you'd hand me over to that thing you call the Law if you could, wouldn't you?"

McVeigh nodded.

"Sure," he said. "And I expect to get you, too, Carter. I've got a commission to run you down, dead or alive, if it takes five years."

Carter was silent until they sat down to breakfast. He helped McVeigh to a plate of venison stew and a pint of coffee.

"Did you ever see a man hanged, McVeigh?" he said.

"Never had that pleasure," replied the man-hunter.

Carter shivered.

"I did—once," he said. "My Gawd, what a place hell must be, McVeigh! It's filled with jurors, an' judges an' witnesses, and not so much with murderers as you'd think. When you kill a man by your vote in the jury box you're doin' it deliberate, an' all you've got to do is just once to see a man hung to know what sort of a crime it is. An' you'd send me to the rope-end if you could, wouldn't you?"

"Mebby you'd get off with ten or twenty years," temporized the man-hunter.

"No—I wouldn't," said Carter. "They'd hang me. What—what was that?"

He turned swiftly and faced the door. McVeigh straightened. Carter did not see the gleam that shot like a flash of lightning into his eyes. The outlaw turned toward him again.

"Did you hear anything?" he asked.

"One of the huskies whining," said McVeigh. "That was all."

Carter laughed uneasily.

"Guess I'm a little nervous," he confessed. "I thought I heard a voice. Have another plate of stew?"

McVeigh passed his plate. His eyes were on the door. In another moment it had opened, and he sprang to his feet with a cry of joy and triumph on his lips. Carter whirled about, a hand on his automatic. But he did not draw. What he saw paralyzed him, and his face turned ash-gray. Three men came in, and when they saw McVeigh they paused in astonishment. In another moment they were shaking Mc-

Veigh's good hand. He moved toward the door, but McVeigh was ahead of him, smiling, cool. The man-hunter closed it, and shot the bolt. While the others were throwing off their fur caps and heavy coats, and excusing their sudden entrance to Carter, he drew a stool in front of the door and sat down with his back against it. He smiled straight into Carter's eyes. Then, one after the other, he introduced the three men to him—Sergeant Walker, Constable Conway, and Constable Pierre, of the Fort Churchill patrol, on their way back to the Bay from the Fond du Lac country. He introduced Carter as Williams, by which name he was known at the post.

"I had an accident," he explained. "An' Williams—took me in. Have you had breakfast, boys?"

"An hour ago," Walker replied. "We're making double-quick for Churchill, a week behind schedule. What's the matter? A fall?"

"Shot," said McVeigh.

He looked at Carter. The outlaw had turned his back to him, and was looking straight out through the one window into the gray gloom of the Barren. It was good that McVeigh did not see his face. There was no longer fear there. His hand rested on his automatic. He coughed to cover the metallic click of the safety as he thrust it back with his thumb. He was planning now more swiftly than he had ever planned in his life. There were three against him. In his automatic there were ten shots. He turned slowly, and sat down on the edge of his bunk. The Sergeant and his men were staring at McVeigh. Before they could question him, McVeigh said:

"I won't be able to move for a week or ten days, Sergeant, and I want to send a report of the affair down to headquarters. Get out pencil and paper and write it for me, will you? Guess I can scratch my name at the bottom of it."

Carter pointed to the muslin covered box.

"There's paper and a pencil there," he said. "Help yourself."

His voice was cold and quiet. McVeigh stared at him. He did not catch the slow movement with which Carter drew his automatic and slipped it under the edge of the blanket on which he sat, his fingers gripping the butt. Conway got the pencil and paper, and Sergeant Walker cleared a space on the table.

Slowly, as if he meant that in his triumph

every word should be an added torture to the trapped outlaw, McVeigh began his story.

"I beg to report," he began his dictation, "that on the first of January I set out from Churchill on the trail of Bob Carter, the murderer with instructions to get my man, dead or alive." And then, looking straight across at Carter as he spoke, he briefly told his story up to the hour of the fight. For a moment he hesitated, and Carter's fingers tightened about his automatic. The moment of action was almost at hand. Walker, at the table, was at a disadvantage. He would take Pierre and Conway first, and then Walker. With satisfaction he noted that the flaps of their revolver holsters were buttoned down. He even smiled across at McVeigh. And then McVeigh began to tell of the duel at the foot of the ridge. He told of the last shot, of rising, staggering out from behind his hummock, and falling senseless.

"When I returned to consciousness," he went on, "I was in this cabin. Williams had found me in time, and brought me here. It was then that I found—"

HE paused, and for a full ten seconds his eyes met Carter's.

"What?" asked Sergeant Walker.

"That my last shot had killed Carter," he finished. "That's about all for a preliminary, Walker. I'll make the full report when I reach Churchill. Tell Renshaw I'll be there within ten days or two weeks." He spoke directly to Carter now. "What time is it, Williams?" he asked.

Like one in a dream Carter looked at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he choked.

McVeigh rose with a laugh.

"If you're going to get that message of mine down to Jan Rien's on time you'd better hustle," he said.

Carter put on his coat and cap, and picked up his pack. He made no effort to speak. But at the door he gripped McVeigh's hand, and McVeigh whispered, "If it's a boy you might call 'im Jack. That's my name." Then he thrust Carter out, closed the door, and turned toward his comrades.

"Queer acting chap—that Williams," said Walker.

"Yes, queer—very queer," agreed McVeigh. "Do you mind loading my pipe for me, Walker? I guess I need a smoke."

# The Twilight of André Girard

By **GEORGE MARSH**

*Author of "The Trail to Death."*



**A**NDRÉ GIRARD, bowman of the twenty-two-foot freight canoe, peered through squinting eyes at the plunging water downstream. His arched back and braced legs, the taut muscles of his forearms as he gripped the spruce setting pole, marked the intensity of his interest in that terror to canoemen known as the "Kettle" of the Matagami. The two polers in the waist of the boat and the sternman threw questioning glances at the crouching figure of the pilot as they eased the deeply loaded craft toward a grey ledge which thrust menacingly into the churning river.

Suddenly the seamed features of the bowman knotted in perplexity. Beads of sweat burst from the lined forehead framed by

grizzled hair. The searching eyes winked hard as a shaking hand for an instant left the suspended pole to shade them from the low July sun.

As the canoe, "stuffed" back against the current by the setting poles, slowly approached the ledge above which the caught water wheeled in a wide eddy, the bowman signalled with his hand. Released by the poles the boat leaped downstream in the pull of the black-water channel. Again the peering eyes of the bowman blinked in doubt. Furtively they sought familiar ranges on the shore, groped desperately in the broken water ahead. Then, of a sudden, as if a cloud had blanketed the sun, the light dimmed, and slowly the vision of



André Girard was veiled by a grey blur.

The warning shout of the sternman pierced the din of the rapids to reach the ears of the stricken Girard who stood frozen in the bow, dazed, impotent.

Sensing that the boat had reached the eddy the blinded bowman gave the belated signal and thrust instinctively with his pole. But it was too late. The whirling lip of the revolving water caught the bow of the canoe and sucked it inshore. For a space the desperate crew battled to hold the swinging craft off the ledge on which it would crack up like an eggshell, while the bowman groped with his pole, praying for his sight. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the grey blur cleared from the eyes of André Girard. He could see! Mad with joy he joined his crew in their struggle to break clear of the eddy and save the boat and cargo.

Once, twice, three times the yawing canoe circled the wide whirlpool and shot toward the shoulder of rock that split the inshore current. Once, twice, three times four steel-shod poles rang on the ledge as the crew thrust and swung the caught boat clear. Time after time from lack of poling bottom they failed to free the circling craft on the turn and were swept back inshore. But, at last, the metal shoes held, four poles bowed under the united thrusts of the straining men until they broke the grip of the whirling water and the canoe lunged downstream.

Again it was the André Girard of old who stood in the bow. Following the black-water channels that he had known from boyhood, dodging upthrust rocks and boulders on which the mad river lashed itself to foam and flung spume, he piloted the craft to the foot of the rapids where they beached the boat.

Stripping off the lashings of the spray-splashed tarpaulin the crew feverishly unloaded the freight of ninety-pound bags of flour. But the boat had shipped little water. The flour was safe.

"Why you mees de signal?" he roughly asked.

Michel Lemoyne's face stiffened under its deep tan, but there was only pity in the level eyes that met the old man's fierce look.

"I wait for you but you was too slow," he quietly answered.

"Too slow!" choked the bowman, glancing from one to the other of the cryptic

faces of the crew. "You are de first man on dis riviere to call André Girard slow!" he continued, his lined face twisted with wrath. "You not follow de signal so we lose de flour, eh? You weesh to be de beeg feller at Flying Post—de head canoe-man! Den you get ma girl, Lise!"

THE old man had whipped himself into a frenzy as the stark truth of Lemoyne's statement seared into his hurt pride. He had been too slow! As a river mist shrouds a valley the strong water above the eddy had been curtained from his straining eyes by a grey haze. For a space he had been helpless, when the safety of the boat depended on his vision. He had been too slow—and his crew knew his shame.

But his pride died hard in the man who, for thirty years, had brought the fur-brigade from Flying Post up the wild Mata-gami and the loaded freighters home without the loss of a sack of flour or pack of furs. And his narrowed eyes glittered as he hurled the insult at the man who stood in the water watching him.

For a space the amazed Lemoyne was unable to speak. To be accused of treachery to his chief when the safety of cargo and crew depended on his following the signal of the bowman was unbelievable. Trembling with anger he leaned across the canoe toward the old man whose distorted features reflected the emotions which swept him.

"You are too old—for me to fight!" he protested. "You not know what you say! You will have shame for dis!"

Then his comrades of the crew drew him away and the three built a fire and started their supper while the lonely and shaken André Girard sat on the shore gazing downstream at the spruce ridges rimmed with fire by the setting sun.

Later, eating his supper in silence, he sat on the shore with his bitter thoughts while the flush of the after glow slowly left the river as the long twilight faded, and the spruce was packed with dusk. Back at the fire the three young men lounged with their pipes conversing in low tones and André knew that their talk was of his strange actions at the eddy and his unfair treatment of Lemoyne.

Well, some day, he thought, they, too would find themselves growing old and their eyes playing tricks on them when the

sun danced on the white-water; they, too, would be facing what he faced now—old age, rotting out at the post; a few years of getting in wood, and tending fish-nets with the women, of easy trips with the dogs over the snow until blindness and rheumatism tied him to his cabin, a toothless ghost of what was once the great André Girard, the best riverman and dog-runner in the Matagami country. It had been growing more frequent of late—this grey blur that suddenly blanketed his eyes only to lift. The autumn before, while hunting meat for the post, he had lost a moose when the sights of his rifle were blotted out, as a blizzard blots out a ridge. One day, on the way up to the railroad, it had seemed as if they were poling the canoe through an April ice-mist shot with dancing points of light. With sweat bursting from his face through fear for the boat and that the crew would guess his secret he had mechanically thrust and pushed on his pole until his vision cleared. But today it had come when he sorely needed his eyes. And they had failed him.

Lemoyne had said he was slow but had he guessed that the bowman had been stone-blind until the boat took the second swing at the eddy? For a year he had prided himself that he had kept the secret of his failing eyesight but what was there to say now to McLeod, the factor, when they reached the post? After the insult Michel would show no mercy. Why should he? He would tell the factor that André Girard had put the boat into the "Kettle" whirlpool and had narrowly missed losing the flour. That would be enough and his long years of faithful service forgotten. He would never take the fur boats to the railroad again—never come singing home at the head of the brigade. In the bow of the big canoe would stand young Lemoyne who had waited long for this to happen—waited for the place of André Girard, and for his girl, Lise.

The old *voyageur* cupped his chin in two gnarled hands as his tortured thoughts went back to the night before the start of brigades from Flying Post. He had smoked a pipe in the trade-house with McLeod, then crossed the clearing to his cabin. It was warm and, as he passed an open window, he heard voices and stopped to listen.

"It weel not be long now, Lise," Lemoyne announced triumphantly. "He ees

too old to bring de freight can' down riviere. De Kettle and de Long Sault will soon be too moch for heem."

With a bitter heart André heard Michel Lemoyne pronounce his death warrant as head *voyageur* at Flying Post.

"He ees so proud, he will not admit he grows old," replied Lise, sorrowfully. "It will cut heem like a knife, Michel, to see you take de place he hold so long. He ees so proud."

"But he say we can marry when he leeve de riviere—not before. Is it strange dat I weesh it? I have wait' long for you, Lise."

"I know, but we can wait a leetle longer. Soon he will see he is too old and tell M'sieu' McLeod. It will break hees heart. We can wait."

"It ees not dat. I would wait for you—manee year, for sure. He grows too slow for bowman. Suppose some day he lose."

WITH a stride the angered Girard entered the cabin through the open door and glared at the man who held Lise in his arms.

"So de wolf he wait for de ole caribou to play out, eh?" stormed the embittered old man. "Wal you find de ole caribou got life in heem yet! He take de fur-boat up to de railroad tomorrow—and nex' year, al-so!"

With an arm still circling the waist of the distressed Lise, Lemoyne calmly faced the agitated Girard.

"For manee year you are de best man on de Matagami—no one say no to dat. But all men grow ole. I love Lise but you say we shall not marry wile you are head-man at Flying Post."

The black eyes of the speaker glittered malevolently as his voice grew hard as flint. "Wal, I say to your face, André Girard, you are too ole for de Kettle and de Long Sault!"

Inflamed with rage and stung pride the old man pointed to the door with a shaking hand. "W'en André Girard leeve de riviere, you come back—not before!"

Deliberately the tall, young sternman kissed the girl, and with an "A'voir, Lise!" left the cabin.

And now, three weeks later, the man who sat with his grief in the dusk of the river shore faced the bitter truth of Lemoyne's warning that night at Flying Post. To-day his eyes had proved that he was too old for the "Kettle," and tomorrow there were

the treacherous reaches of white-water of the Long Sault. What if his sight left him there? The coming of the grey blur in that churning, rock-scarred mile would mean the end of them all.

His calloused hands worked nervously at the thought. But no, it was some time ago when that mist caught him on the way up river—more than two weeks between that and the trouble to-day. It would not come again so soon—not to-morrow. And the men had not guessed. They thought him old and slow but did not know about his eyes. He was glad that the two freight canoes following them had not seen him in the eddy—had not witnessed the shame of André Girard whom men had once called a magician in white-water, the “Wizard of the Matagami.” No, if this was to be his last trip with the boats, if this was the end of André Girard, he would bring them in to Flying Post as he had brought them in for thirty years, standing in the bow of the big canoe as the port people waved from the shore. If the grey blur came in the Long Sault there would be no years of crippled old age for André Girard, a pensioner of the company, cast aside like an old canoe to rot. But what of his crew and the cargo of flour?

At the thought his iron fingers convulsively twisted, in the agony of his harassed soul. Then he got control of himself. This thing could not happen. The mist would not come again so soon—not tomorrow, and he knew the rocks and channels of the Long Sault as he knew the palm of his hand. There was no danger, and to tell them—to acknowledge, after what he had said today, to Michel—no, it was impossible. He could not come home to Flying Post with Lemoyne in the bow, disgraced. He would return as he had set out, in the place where he had toiled and commanded for thirty years—the bow of the big canoe.

And so, at last, André Girard went to his blanket.

Hour after hour, the day following, the freighter rode the swift Matagami past timbered shores and sleeping ridges, until, deep in the afternoon the faint drum-beat of rapids drifted upstream.

Turning to the crew André announced: “We land and lash down de cover!”

It was a heartened and grimly confident bowman, who, aided by the strangely silent crew, busied himself with the lashings of the tarpaulins designed to protect the flour

bags from shipped spray. For that day his eyes had seemed young again as he tested them on the hurrying river. But while they worked, through the tail of his eye André caught the swift exchange of doubtful glances among the crew, the furtive shake of dark heads.

“Ah-hah! Dey t’ink dat André Girard ees dead, eh, geeve dem trouble een de strong water?” he ruminated. “Wal, he run de Long Sault before dey was born. Dey not find heem slow today.”

The boat left the shore and ran down to the head of the rapids famous on the Matagami as the Long Sault. Here, dropping rapidly from the plateau, the river boiled and churned and lashed itself into a white frenzy of foam. But, unlike many rapids, through this mile of unleashed water ran black-water channels which could be followed by a loaded canoe, if the man in the bow knew where they were and possessed the skill and daring to run them. And André Girard had run them for thirty years.

WITH the din of driven water, split and swerved from its course, bursting into flying spume on boulder and ledge and upthrust rock, the Matagami roared through the Long Sault. And, as the big canoe dipped into the suck of the first chute, in the bow, with muscles taut as wire, stood in a half-crouch the defiant figure of André Girard. With pole poised for a quick thrust the old *voyageur* waited like a hawk on a spruce top, his wrinkled face set in a smile of triumph. For to-day André Girard was himself again. To-day he would show these young men who yesterday had seen his shame that the one men had called “Wizard” again stood in the bow. For today he had his eyes!

Down into the maw of the Long Sault dropped the canoe. Skirting sunken boulders over which the brown water mounded to burst into foam below; missing by the width of a paddle splinters of upthrust rock where the wild river churned itself white; dodging knife-edged ledges that would rip the bottom from stem to stern, André hung to the familiar black-water channels. To-day his crew was not finding him too slow! Never in the years of his proud youth had he shown more skill or daring. Never had he brought the big company canoe through the roaring pitfalls and flung spume of the Long Sault with greater mastery of the art



of the white-water man. And, at length, his heart exulted with his triumph as, drenched with spray, he glanced downstream. There, below him, danced the "boilers" in the deep water at the foot of the last drop. He had won! Today he had not failed them—for today he had—his—

Suddenly, as a black curtain shuts off light, the waters of the Long Sault were blotted from the sight of André Girard.

*The grey blur had come!*

There in the bow of the plunging freighter facing a quarter-mile of wild white-water stood its pilot—stone—blind!

In a frenzy of despair his squinting eyes strained to pierce the grey wall which curtailed his vision. They were riding to their doom! He had betrayed his men—his trust; brought them here to drown like trapped mink in the Long Sault!

As the shouts of his crew broke through the din of the rapids pride died in the heart of André Girard. His pole slipped through his nerveless fingers. Turning with a gesture of despair to the men fighting to save themselves and the boat he covered his eyes with a hand and crumpled to his knees.

Deserted by its pilot the freighter lunged on, shipping spray and side-wash, while three desperate men toiled to hold her in the channel. Huddled in the bow a stricken old man waited for the end. Then a cross-chute struck the nose of the boat and, turning her, dropped the bow on a submerged ledge. Pivoting on the grounded bow the stern swung downstream while the canoe rolled and a wave ran the length of her gunwale.

Frantically the crew thrust with their poles to free the caught bow of the doomed boat. Seconds, now, and she would fill and break up while the battered bodies of four drowned men were swept to the foot of the Long Sault. Then, suddenly, André Girard was alive.

Blind as he was there was a chance to help them yet—these men he had betrayed. He knew where they were—knew of old this cross-chute that had dropped the bow on the flat ledge. There was a chance yet.

Gripping the gunwale he leaped into the rushing water. Once, twice—three times his feet were swept from under him as he clung to the boat, fighting for a footing on the slippery rock. At last he managed to hold his feet while the current drove at his

braced legs. Then, changing his grip, his iron back arched with his heave on the bow as the steel-shod poles of the crew struck the ledge. But the boat held fast. Again the blind man strained at the caught bow. He slipped and barely reached the gunwale with one upflung hand as the current pulled his feet from under him. With the aid of the other hand he regained his footing.

There was no time to lose, now. It was his last chance—the last chance of André Girard to make amends for what he had done. If the boat moved he would miss her—never get in again—but—

He reached under the stem. For an instant his blinded eyes saw the face of his girl, Lise; then he put the last ounce of his strength into a desperate heave.

She moved—was off! With a groping lunge André followed the boat he had freed and fell on his chest across the gunwale. Swinging his legs inside, he flattened along the drenched tarpaulin covering the flour bags while the nearest poler leaped over him to take his place. Now, stern first, with Michel Lemoyne as pilot and six inches of water awash on her bottom, the freighter wallowed on into the last foaming reaches of the Long Sault—and won!

ON a flat stretch of shore below the rapids the three exhausted polers beached her. Leaping from the boat, the crew feverishly stripped off the wet tarpaulin, unloaded the flour and turned the water out of the canoe, while André stood helplessly on the beach, his face twisted with the remorse that sickened his heart.

"Wal, I t'ink you do good job to-day!" Lemoyne turned from an inspection of the lower tier of bags that had lain in the bottom of the canoe in the shipped water, to scowl into the squinting eyes of the old man.

"How moch—ees wet?" faltered Girard.

"Ten bag! Nine hunder pound of flour we lost wid you een de bow!" said the other, bitterly. "I say you was too ole but you not listen. Now w'at you tell Mc-Leod?"

"Nine hunder pound—ov—flour!" murmured the man whose face pictured the depth of his humiliation. "Nevaire have I lose a bag, before, een de Long Sault." With a groan he turned and walked squarely into a thick growth of alder. Backing away, he turned again, took a

step and, tripping over a small boulder, fell on his hands.

The black scowl on the face of Michel Lemoyne shifted to a look of surprise. "W'at de trouble wid you?" he demanded.

Slowly getting to his feet, the old man replied: "I go blind, back dere een de rapids w'en I drop my pole."

"You not see w'en you jump out and push de cano' off de ledge?" cried Lemoyne, incredulously, peering into the furrowed face that confronted him with unwinking eyes.

"No." The old *voyageur* slowly shook his head. "Eet come like de mist from de spring ice. Eet hide de rapide, de spruce on de shore. I was blind. Den I drop de pole."

"You see noddin—you was blind?" Michel glanced significantly into the dark faces of the listening men beside him.

"I was blind—no good—"

"Ah!" There was a pregnant interval of silence, then Lemoyne went on: "You know blind man got small chance een dat rapide to ketch de boat eef she move off de ledge."

"I was—no good—"

Shortly André Girard sat drying out in the heat of the supper fire with the bitter thoughts of his return to Flying Post, a helpless man, disgraced. Would this grey blur, he wondered, never pass away? Always before, it had left him as swiftly as it came, but this time it had stayed. Did it mean that he would finish his days, waited on by Lise, a useless blind man, once the head *voyageur* who had made one trip too many through the Long Sault? How was he to explain it all to McLeod who had trusted him through the years?

They brought him his supper on a tin plate, with a steaming dipper of tea, but he would not let them help him with his food. Later, as they heaped up the fire to dry out their clothes and blankets, he raised his head from his hands and his heart suddenly leaped. The mist! It had gone! There were the red flames of the snapping birch, the shapes of the men, the fire-glow on the shadow-packed spruce behind them! Disgraced though he was he would not return to Flying Post a blind man!

Trembling with joy he stared up at the violet sky. Yes, there were the stars! He cried to Michel: "My eyes, I got my eyes again for sure! I can see! I can see!"

"You can see? Eet ees a miracle!" ex-

claimed the puzzled Lemoyne. "How can you see, now, een de dark when you fall over de rock before de sun set?" he demanded.

"Eet was de mist, now eet has gone!"

"Eet was dis mist dat come w'en you put us into de Kettle?" asked Michel suddenly.

André nodded.

"Den you did wrong to take de bow dis morning!" retorted Lemoyne, bitterly.

"Yes, I did wrong," admitted the old man. Then he frankly related how, for a year, at infrequent intervals, the grey blur had clouded his sight. Because it had come the day before at the "Kettle" he felt sure that he could safely take the bow the following day. It had never before returned so soon, and it was his last trip through the Long Sault—the last voyage of André Girard, once known as a white-water man from Nepigon to the Bay. He was old, as Lemoyne had said, and his work was over, still he had hoped to stand where he had stood for thirty years when the canoe swung in to the post. But it was wrong and he had risked their lives and lost half the flour.

In silence the crew listened while the old man, sloughing his pride as a snake sloughs his skin, showed them his naked heart. Some day they would all be old and would understand what the coming of the years meant to one who had once boasted of his strength. Some day they would have to face the slow approach of age—stiffening muscles on the winter trails, dimming eyesight, the ridicule of the young—and would remember his words that night.

**D**AYBREAK found the camp stirring with life, for Flying Post was but a three hours' easy run down the Matagami and the men were eager for an early start. When the boat was loaded the old *voyageur* waded into the water and, avoiding the eyes of the others, took a place in the waist behind Michel, the bowman. For two hours André paddled in silence, engrossed in his bitter thoughts. Then, when they reached the widening of the Matagami which formed the lake on which the post was located, Michel swung the boat in to the beach. Landing he called the crew ashore where he talked to them in low tones while the old man waited in the boat. Then, pointing to the empty bow position, Lemoyne said to André:

"You ride in to Flying Post een de bow!"

In his surprise the jaw of the old *voy-*

*ageur* dropped. His lips quivered in the flood of emotion that engulfed his heart. His squinting eyes doubtfully searched Lemoyne's impassive face. Could they mean it—these young men—after what had happened? At the thought of riding into the post in the bow of the big freighter—leading his men home, his throat tightened in a muffled sob.

"You—you want me—dere," he faltered, "een de bow, aftair what I—"

"You will nevaire ride dere again," said Lemoyne brutally. "You are tru! Your last trip you can tak' de bow!"

And so, later in the morning, the big canoe, followed by the other two in the brigade which had overtaken them, raced across the lake to the whitewashed log buildings of Flying Post. Paddling like a demon the heart-broken André set the stroke for his crew as they neared the post. On the shore the people were already gathering to welcome them.

For the man in the bow of the leading boat it was the end of all things—the end of forty years of grinding toil, with the dogs of the winter mail and fur sleds, with the summer canoes. For thirty years he had been headman at the post and, among the canoemen and trading Indians, his word had been law. But now the "Wizard of the Matagami" was coming home to meet the accusing eyes of his chief—to answer for the flour that had been put in his keeping. Knowing the danger from his failing eyesight he had piloted the boat into the Long Sault. And he must pay. Because he was old and done, Lemoyne and the crew had given him the bow that he might lead the brigade in on his last trip. But when they faced McLeod, Michel would take his revenge for the insult at the "Kettle." The truth that would expose André Girard to the scorn of the people of the post would be told.

The brigade neared the log landing crowded with the chattering wives and children of the crews and a scattering of half-breeds and Ojibwas not yet gone to their summer fishing camps. André's squinting eyes searched for Lise. Yes, there she was, waving. She was happy, now, at the return of her father and Michel; but what would she say when she heard the story? Would her face darken with shame? In the years to come when he was blind and a burden to her would those black eyes he loved flash with scorn

of the father whose old man's pride had caused his disgrace?

The boat slid into the landing and the crew leaped out among the excited women and children. The round arms of Lise encircled the neck of the heavy-hearted Girard, then she was taken from him by the eager Michel. In a daze the man who soon would hear the sentence that would strip him of his manhood stood staring out at the glittering lake.

"Well, André, have a good trip?"

The hand of McLeod was shaking his. Pain like the thrust of steel cut through his heart. His stiff lips quivered as his eyes sought his moccasins, unable to meet the gaze of the friend of forty years. He swallowed hard then, sucking in a deep breath, faced McLeod's puzzled look.

"I lose—ten bag ov flour—een de Long Sault," he faltered, his narrowed eyes winking hard as his face filled with blood.

"You—what?" cried the astonished factor.

"I lose ten bag—"

"Ten bags of flour!" gasped the incredulous McLeod. "Are you crazy—man? Ten bags—in the Long Sault?" The factor's face went grave with the realization of what this loss meant to the post.

"Ah-hah!"

"Get the stuff into the storehouse," rasped McLeod, his face working with wrath, "then bring your crew to the trade-room! The first time in thirty years—nine hundred pounds of flour!"

ANDRÉ GIRARD stopped at the trade-house door before joining his men and the waiting McLeod, inside. His eyes sought the blue ridges in the distance, lingered on the wind-ripple that caught and reflected the sun, turning the lake to dancing gold, then shifted to two old men, munching their pipe stems between toothless gums, on the near shore. On the lean features of the old *voyageur* was written the misery that sickened his heart. It was his last moment of manhood. When Michel told his story André Girard would be sent in disgrace to join those mumbling old men who sat in the sun and talked of the days that were gone. He slowly sucked in a deep breath, then, with a last wistful glance at the lake and hills that had known him in the proud days of his youth, entered the trade-room.

"Men," snapped McLeod, "it's a bitter



pill for me to swallow to have my headman, and you, Michel, the one I had picked to succeed him, come in with that ruined flour. It means short rations for all of us this winter." The factor scowled at the four silent men who faced him, and went on. "Now, Michel, let's have your side of it! After that André can explain, why, for the first time in thirty years, he comes home with wet flour!"

With a quick intake of the breath the old *voyageur* stiffened to listen while Michel Lemoyne paid him many fold for his bitter words at the "Kettle." He had accused his sternman of treachery and now McLeod would hear of André Girard's own treachery to his thrust. It was Lemoyne's turn now and his revenge would be sweet.

"Wal, everyt'ing go all right for sure," began Michel, slowly, "ontil we reach de Long Sault."

André started in surprise. He stared hard at the young sternman through puzzled eyes. Michel was saying nothing of the trouble at the "Kettle." There was some trick here—what did he mean?

"Eet was ver' bad day to run de Long Sault," continued Michel, deliberately. "De rapide was smoky. De win' blow de spray off de top ov de white-water so we not see good, and de sun was een our eye. Eet was bad day for sure."

Michel stopped in his recital as if searching his memory. He threw a glance from the tail of an eye at one of the crew, then looked at André.

"Why does he wait? Why does he wait?" murmured the agitated *voyageur*, peering hard at the man whose story would loose upon him the anger of the factor—banish him forever from the white-waters.

"Well you knew the chances you took when you went into the Long Sault with the sun in your eyes," commented McLeod, impatiently. "Where did you get into trouble?"

"We were far down, past de beeg cut-bank, and de sun was bad," drawled Michel, exasperatingly, while the crew exchanged furtive glances. "Dere ees a bad cross-chute and a flat ledge—"

André caught his breath while his nails gouged the palms of his hands and his heart hammered. It was coming—the shameful story of the grey blur that struck him blind in the Long Sault with his helpless crew behind him. Michel Lemoyne was taking his revenge—making him pay, toying with

him as a fox toys with a wood-mouse before the final snap of his jaws.

"Wal," went on Michel, "we run down dat channel above the cross-chute and de flat ledge, and André geeve de signal—but—but—de sun blind me. I not see heem. De cross-chute put us on de ledge. I was—too—slow!"

The astonished André gaped at the cryptic face of Lemoyne whose level eyes coolly met McLeod's scowl. What did he say? He was too slow? He, Michel, had been too slow—had put the boat on the ledge? Michel Lemoyne, his enemy, taking the blame for the loss of the flour! Was he mad? This man who would be headman at Flying Post—throwing his chances to the winds?

"You were too slow, eh?" roared the factor. "Too slow—and I thought you were the ablest sternman on the river!"

Then, in a flash, the light came to André's dazed brain. This boy whom he thought hated him—wanted his place, was lying for him—lying for the honor of André Girard. It was the spirit of the breed, "the riders of the strong water," that was speaking. Old and done, his crew were standing between him and disgrace—this man who had been their chief. The Brotherhood of the White-Water had rallied to defend their own.

Like the lift of waves over a reef a flood of emotion choked the trembling old man. Winking back the tears he stood for a space pointing at the self-possessed Lemoyne. This boy who had stood between André Girard and his old age should not take the blame that would ruin his future at Flying Post.

"Eet ees a lie!"

MCLEOD shifted startled eyes to the agitated face of the speaker.

"I go blind een de Long Sault!" cried the old man. "I, André Girard, put de boat on dat ledge!"

"What's this—went blind?" demanded the perplexed factor. "What d'you mean? You both claim you're to blame! What's going on here?"

"I go blind manee tam dis year! I was blind een de Long Sault!" Ruthlessly André trampled on his pride as he bared his heart to his chief.

"But dere ees more to tell!" protested Michel, vehemently, when André had finished. "W'en de boat hit de ledge, dat old

man dere, wid no eye to see and rapide boilin' below heem, jump into de water. Four tam he slip and loose hees feet wile he fight to save de crew and boat. At last wid small chance to save heemself he heave de cano' off dat ledge. We would all be een de riviere now, but for André Girard, de bes' bowman evair on de Matagami!"

For a space the astonished McLeod gazed through eyes suspiciously moist at the brothers of the white-water who faced him—the sternman who had so passionately defended his chief, and the broken

*voyageur* who had bidden farewell to the wild reaches of the Matagami.

"You two are a pair," he said at last. "Michel, you lied to me, and I respect you for it. André, you were right in having only the truth. I want to shake your hands. This flour was lost through the fault of no man."

"Lise," said Girard, later in his cabin, resting a hand on the shoulder of the new headman, "you and Michel go and have talk wid Pere Brisson. Dere ees weddin' at Flying Post to-morrow."

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# The Pensioner

By  
Frank Richardson Pierce



**T**HE pensioner stretched himself out before the stove, blinked his eyes and yawned; a canine patriarch who had almost lived his span of life and now in his declining years hovered nearer the fire than his old-time team-mates.

Not many years ago, the Malemute's powerful jaws had snapped an attacking wolf's paw clean off, and a second snap had stretched out another wolf with its throat gaping. Then, as the pack was about to tear the Malemute apart by weight of numbers, Evans had rushed to the rescue with a few well-placed shots from his thirty-thirty rifle.

Like an old man with memories, the pensioner enjoyed reliving the colorful days

of his youth. Evans had saved his life that time, but then, to offset that, the old Malemute had saved Evans from death on several occasions. A wonderful man was Evans in the pensioner's eyes. He rarely laid the lash across a dog's back; always thought of his team first and himself last. He was big, rangy, masterful, and the pensioner's observing eyes had noted the approving glances of more than one pretty girl; but Evans did not seem to care for them.

The pensioner did not care for women, either. There was one exception—a beautiful creature, with soft hands that thrilled him to the core when she stroked his ears or back. She lived in Seattle, a distant



place of many noises, where the trail beneath a dog's pads is hard and where strange odors assail a dog's nostrils at every turn. He had spent a whole winter at Seattle and only once saw snow. It was a poor country for Malemute.

His master liked this girl, too; he looked upon her with a wonderful light in his eyes, and often opened his arms to hold her close. In all his experience the Malemute had never before witnessed such a foolish performance. When they had sailed from Seattle in the spring the girl had come to the dock to see them off. The next winter had been different.

Evans, his partner Grady, and the dogs had wintered high in the mountains that year. They had staked claims on different forks of a small river, but were sharing the same cabin for companionship. It was a time when food was low, and the men quarreled bitterly.

"Rot!" Grady had exclaimed. "You can't let sentiment rule your heart in this game. Arctic was a great dog in his day, but he's through. His teeth are gone except for a few snags, and you're feeding him boiled rice which we'll need ourselves before spring. The other dogs are getting lean, but there's lots of meat on Arctic's frame."

The light of murder had leaped into Evans's eyes. He had leaned across the table, his eyes blazing with hate for the man he had once called his dearest friend. "God knows, I've got a sense of gratitude. Old Arctic and I have been in too many tight situations together for me not to see him through now."

"He's through!" Grady had said evenly. "He's outlived his usefulness. You can't make a pensioner out of him with my grub, and that's final. If you're so chicken-hearted you can't do the sensible thing and shoot him, I'll do it for you." Grady had grasped Arctic by the scruff of the neck and started for the door.

"Let go, Grady!" Evans's face was ashen in the stress of his terrible rage. "Let go! Or—or—I'll kill you!" Grady was no coward, yet he shrank from the awful expression in the other's face. "Kill him!" Evans snarled. "Kill the best pal, man or beast, I ever had, bar none? Toss that faithful body that has stood between me and death to the dogs for food? Curse you, Grady, for suggesting it! There's not room in this cabin for both of us—I'll clear out!"

THEY had divided their food to the last pound, and Evans, with half the dogs and equipment, had mushed a mile down the frozen North Fork of the river, then back up the South Fork another mile to an old cabin. In the midst of an Arctic winter he had cleared out rotting debris and turned it into a respectable abode. The next summer he reached bedrock and pay dirt. He toiled early and late, but when the salmon came to spawn and die he spent many a precious hour away from the sluice boxes while he caught and dried fish for the dogs.

During winter nights when the storms howled without and the draft sighed up the stove pipe, Arctic permitted himself the luxury of resting his eyes affectionately on his master. The corner shelf was the master's shrine for a photograph of the wonderful girl, and for several moosehide pokes stiff with gold. Of late, Arctic noticed Evans was restless and frequently looked upon the photograph several minutes at a time. Once he had exclaimed, "Only ten more days, little girl!" Then he whooped with joy.

"She's coming, old boy!" Evans told the dog one day. "Our Edith is coming to brighten this old place. She's a brave little girl to come 'way up here alone to marry a scrub like me, and we'll make it as nice for her as we can."

Evans overhauled the sled, loaded it down with heavy warm robes, a small tent, and provisions sufficient for the trip to the little settlement where narrow bands of steel connected the interior with the ice-free port of Seward on the coast.

Jennings, the settlement storekeeper, greeted them as old friends. "Brought old Arctic along, too, huh? You're a blamed sentimental young fool, Evans, keeping an old pensioner on your pay roll. He'll never be any more use to you."

"You infernal old hypocrite," retorted Evans, grinning, "if I didn't know you had a pensioner of your own in your kennels I'd take a healthy punch at you. Arctic's through; but he's earned his rest. I felt kind of sorry for the old boy, coming in."

"You've got half an hour till train time," said Jennings, "so you'd better fix up. I'll take care of the dogs; soft stuff for Arctic and fish for the rest."

"Thanks, Jennings; and if it's not too much trouble, you might ask Mrs. Jennings to pack up a special box of grub a bride's

likely to need when she starts up house-keeping. I got plenty of staples, but Edith will want to make some cakes, pies, and things, I suppose."

"Another good man gone!" muttered Jennings facetiously.

"What's that!" interrupted Mrs. Jennings unexpectedly.

"The right way!" added Jennings hastily.

IT was the Alaska of song and story Edith Densmore faced as the "Victoria" made way up Resurrection Bay to Seward. The bay is perhaps twelve miles long and very narrow, walled in on either side by a mighty row of mountains, and the snow came down to the rocky shore.

The girl, warmly clothed, paced the deck, a picture of radiance, beauty, and health, eagerly watching the scene. The wildness delighted, yet at the same time filled her with a strange dread, as if this rugged country intended to put her to the test.

"Oh, I love it!" she whispered. "Love it and yet fear it."

As Evans gathered her into his arms, a considerable portion of Seward's male population looked on with hearty approval. Attentive ears heard a muffled "Archie!" in reply to his "Edith!" Then he gave instructions for the disposal of her grips.

"Thank heavens, the ship wasn't late," he said, getting back to earth. "The train leaves in a few minutes for Anchorage."

"And Arctic?" she queried. "How is the dear old fellow?"

"Fine as a fiddle, getting younger every day, except for his teeth. He's up the line, waiting for you at Jennings's."

Two days later, after the wedding, when the train pulled out from Anchorage and headed into the vast land called the "interior," a score of newly-made old friends were on hand to bid them farewell. The train carried freight of all kinds—mail, passengers, and dogs. There were men in parkas, others in overcoats; some dressed for the trail, others dressed as though for a conventional business conference. They smoked cigars, cigarettes, and pipes, swapped trail experiences, and looked upon Malemutes and huskies contemptuously.

"Now," Edith told Evans, "I know why dogs mean so much in this land. Do the thrilling adventures they tell of really happen, or do they tell me these things because I am a tenderfoot?"

He laughed. "No, they're not telling yarns. When a man leaves the last road-house behind, he's on his own hind legs, relying on himself and dogs."

"And when a woman—"

"The same unrelenting rule; but this little woman needn't worry about that—she'll always have a man to do that for her, when worry is in order. But I've mushed all over this land and, thanks to my dogs, a strong back, and a weak mind, I've always come out on top."

"The next stop is ours!" Evans gathered up their bags, while Edith peered curiously through the window. The expanse of snow was unbroken, except for a little cluster of buildings from which smoke was trailing. A little sigh of homesickness escaped her, a strange lump filled her throat. She bit her trembling lips lest he see and perhaps not understand, then a cry of delight escaped her, and the lump and dread vanished. "There's old Arctic, Archie. You get off first and I'll follow and see if he remembers me."

The dog came trotting slowly toward the train ahead of Jennings and his wife. Evans set the bags down upon the snow as the dog came to him. Then the dog stopped abruptly, his nose sniffing the air. Like a flash he rushed toward the girl. "Brace yourself, Edith," warned Evans, "he's coming."

The great paws leaped upward until they quite touched her shoulders, and, while a paw rested on either shoulder, she was kept busy ducking her head to avoid enthusiastic osculations.

"Just the way I felt when I saw her, Old Man!" said Evans.

Mrs. Jennings did not wait for an introduction. "I'm right glad to see you, Edith!" she exclaimed. "I've had dinner waiting for an hour. You're a brave little lady to come up here alone—even for Archie." And her beaming smile seemed to lighten everything with its radiance. Then she placed a motherly arm about the girl's waist and led her to the house.

LONG before daylight the following day, they were under way. Nine big Malemutes handled the heavy sled with ease. Edith, nestling within the warm robes, was snugly comfortable. By a method known only to the skilled freighter, Evans had stowed her steamer trunks and bags on the sled, making a formidable load.

"In this country we start early, so we can make the next camp by daylight," he explained. "The dogs are fresh and strong, so all you have to do is to sit here and enjoy life. Arctic's the only old one in the bunch, and he's running free."

Edith had been fitted out with moccasins and a light parka. To vary the ride, or to lighten the load when the going was rough, she frequently ran behind with Arctic, and marveled at the skill displayed by both Evans and the dogs in handling the sled.

A cloud of steam constantly hovered over the laboring team. With each mile the country about grew wilder. The girl saw not the slightest sign of a trail, yet both dogs and man proceeded with confidence.

"The trail's here all right," Evans explained later. "When we get off it, I can feel the difference immediately. Up here we have educated feet. It won't take you long to educate yours; just try running to either side, and you'll notice the difference." She experimented, and was delighted to find that even her inexperienced feet noted the difference.

They camped that night in a sheltered spot. There was little for Edith to do. She marveled at the skill with which Evans mixed up a batch of sour-dough biscuits. With the aid of a small tree he erected the tent and prepared the sleeping bags. Edith crawled into her bag; then Evans leaned down and kissed her. "Don't forget to wind the clock and put out the cat, dear!" she laughed.

Old Arctic poked his nose through the flap, looked around with approval, then lay down at her feet. "It's comfy," she told herself softly, "and Archie's good to me. Some day I'll know more of this life; then I'll not lean upon him so much."

Some time later she felt him shake her gently. "It's morning," he whispered. "You want to get up and look about!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed delightedly, "The dears!" They were surrounded by the heads of nine dogs, each head thrust through beneath the bottom of the tent, the remainder of the dog being outside. Arctic alone was entirely within.

"They always do that," said Evans, "the air is warmer inside the tent. Now, you stay here and I'll have some hot tea ready in a minute."

So the days passed, each bringing them into wilder country. Noon of the last day

found Evans bending over the fire, stirring up a beef concoction.

"How far is our nearest neighbor?" she queried suddenly.

"I'm taking you to a mighty lonely place," he replied, straightening up. "There's only one man inside of fifty miles of our cabin—Grady. He's only about a mile off; but he's an enemy."

"Oh, that's too bad for both of you," she said with quick sympathy.

"It is," he admitted; "when men quarrel up here it's tragic. But you know about our quarrel. Converting old Arctic into dog food was the one thing Grady should never have suggested to me."

"Perhaps he has thought it over and is sorry," she suggested.

"Not Grady!" he replied. "I would have things different if I could, but we cannot make men to suit ourselves. Well, dinner—oh, pardon me—luncheon is served. We'll eat the next meal at home. We should make it by dark."

"Ah!" exclaimed Evans a moment later. "You don't like my mulligan!"

She flushed. "The mulligan is all right, but the meat tastes old. I'll fill up on something else. Anyway, I don't require much meat, I'm not doing heavy work."

"Sometimes the grub does become a bit stale up here," he explained, "but as a class we are tough customers and thrive on stale meat and ancient, if not too ancient, eggs."

Evans's appetite, whetted by the fresh air and plenty of hard work, was equal to the occasion, and he consumed the stew to the last spoonful. "Now, let's go; we'll wash the dishes at home."

**"PTOMAINÉ!"**

The single word was forced from Evans's set lips. Edith was right, the meat was not only stale, but was unfit for even his strong constitution. Ever since eating he had been conscious of pain. Occasional twinges at first, then sharper with alarming frequency, until now he staggered along at the sled handles on sheer nerve. The same magnificent fighting spirit that had always carried him through was again serving loyally.

"I got to make it to the cabin!" he snarled to himself. "I got to, for her sake. If anything should happen to me out here, good heavens! what would she do, alone? What could she do? I got to make it."



He looked down upon all he held dear, as if seeking strength from sight of her. In the warmth of the robes and gently gliding sled, she was dozing. Again came the agonizing cramps, filling his body with their deathly warning. His face twisted with pain, yet he urged the dogs onward in a normal voice. She must not know.

"Twelve miles more!" he muttered. "Two more, then seven across the lake, then three over the ridge and into the next valley . . . valley . . . up riv . . . river . . . home!" The world seemed to whirl madly; his hands relaxed their grip and he pitched forward into the trail. With pathetic desperation he strove to cry out, but in the stress of his great pain he barely whispered, then lay silent in the trail, behind the sled, which continued on its way . . .

A swift-moving figure of gray that had followed like a shadow for the past two miles peered cautiously down upon the fallen man, then from upraised muzzle came the doleful wail of the wolf; almost a death cry, that violated the peace of the land and disturbed the echoes in the lofty crags. From the timber a second figure cautiously emerged, then together they warily approached the fallen figure, sniffing the air, muscles tense, ready to flee, yet drawing nearer.

A quarter of a mile beyond, the team settled down for the stiff up-grade pull. Half way up, the lead dog missed the trail, something struck the runner, a violent lurch and the sled overturned. Edith found herself face downward in the snow. She was up instantly, laughing. "A nice trick to play on your unsuspecting bride," she cried gayly, then the smile faded; a nameless, horrible dread gripped her. "Archie!" Awakened suddenly from her sleep she was unable to fully comprehend her position. "Arctic! Arctic!" He, too, was gone. The team had been stopped by the overturned sled. The dogs were squatting on their haunches awaiting someone to put things right and mush on.

Then a breath of the Arctic whipped about her, the advance guard of an on-rushing storm. In another hour it would be snowing. Surmising the situation, Edith became strangely cool. She cut the lashings and dragged her trunk and bags clear, then righted the sled, pulled the dogs around and started back. A short distance beyond the lead dog came to a stop, hair bristling in rage, fangs bared in a snarl.

The horror and magnificence of the scene ahead was never to fade from her memory.

EVANS had not moved from where he had fallen. Squarely over his body stood Arctic, making a final stand, his faithful body and loyal old heart a shield for the helpless master he loved; a magnificent old pensioner, adding to the already overwhelming debt his master owed him; old, even feeble, yet ready to match his toothless gums against the murderous fangs of the two wolves circling slowly to attack.

For the first time in their experience, a team of Evans's felt the bite of the lash. It rose and fell until the team was racing. From the ridge above two more wolves loped into view. Reinforced, the others stood their ground. "I'll never make it," she whispered. "Good old Arctic will be pulled down, and then—"

"Whoa!" The team halted, uneasily staring at the wolves. Edith blessed the big brother who had taught her to use a thirty-thirty, and Evans's rifle, which was lashed to the sled. She aimed carefully, fired, and one brute leaped stiff-legged into the air, and fell quivering to the snow; a second shot sent the other dragging its hind quarters into the brush. She brought down a third before it reached the woods. She replaced the rifle and urged the team onward.

"Oh, you poor dear! You are suffering so!" The tears sprang to her eyes unbidden as she touched his white, drawn face with her lips. Evans tried to smile, an attempt that wrenched her very soul.

"Ptomaine!" he whispered with an effort. "It's going to snow!" He paused to gather his strength. "Let me go . . . I'll . . . be . . . all right. . . Drive fast . . . before storm." Cramps twisted his body and features agonizingly, choking off his words. "Brave little wife," he faltered; "love . . . you . . . take . . . old . . . old Arctic . . . and . . ." The words died away to a whisper. She leaned closer.

"Oh, my darling, tell me what you want me to do! I'll never leave you here! Never! Never! Never! Archie! Archie! What of Arctic?" She shook him frantically to arouse him; to draw from the silent lips the phrase that might mean the difference between life and death to both. A strange peace seemed to have settled over Evans; the face lost its agony.

Then she dragged his limp form to the sled and covered it with robes. The lead dog was gnawing at an iceball in one of his pads. "Ready now!" she cried. "Find the way home!" She took her place at the sled. "Mush on!" Beneath her moccasined feet she felt the trail. Arctic trotted contentedly at her heels.

The first flurry of snow greeted her as she bucked her way through a rough spot. She had taken the only apparent course, yet when she emerged to easier going she no longer felt the trail. A twinge of dread gripped her. She urged the dogs onward, allowing the leader his own judgment.

Presently he stopped, and she hurried ahead to find a way down the steep incline. The frozen lake, covered with snow, stretched out before her. Her frantic search to pick up the real trail was fruitless, but the silent figure on the sled goaded her to desperate measures, and she made a trail of her own. Once on the lake she permitted the leader to take his own course, urging the team on at a killing pace now that the going was good. The falling snow blotted out all landmarks.

With each footfall she hoped to feel the trail once more, to know they were not wandering aimlessly about, wasting precious moments. The suspense was maddening, and she lost all track of time, except that it was almost night. The lead dog swerved suddenly, the other followed, and a cry of joy burst from her lips. "A trail!" she sobbed. "A trail, and it's fresh. Ah, Archie, it means help for you."

Eagerly she stooped to examine the tracks. They were small for a man. "A woman!" she whispered. "Another woman here?" A dull, wounded look crept into her eyes, as if someone had lashed her across the face; her despair was tragic, terrible! The tracks were her own. She had made a complete circle without realizing it. And now the full realization of her dire straits swept through her. The lead dog was hopelessly lost; young, strong, and willing, yet he must be guided.

THE figure on the sled was mantled with snow. The sight chilled her. She brushed aside the snow that had sifted to his face and kissed his cold lips. "Oh, my darling!" she whispered, "if those precious lips could speak but a word of guidance, and not depend upon poor, ignorant me."

On! On! Ever pushing aside that

swirling curtain, peering eagerly ahead, only to have it close behind swiftly, yet never lift ahead. Once it did lift for a brief moment, and she saw Arctic standing erect, some distance away, looking toward her. His presence gave her a measure of comfort; then the curtain fell. The storm gradually grew worse and at times even the lead dog was hidden. Again she stopped! Arctic, too, had forsaken her. His actions were strange. Content to trot with the others day after day, now, in her hour of need, he persisted in remaining aloof.

At that moment, when her spirits were lowest, she suddenly realized that Arctic knew the way, was trying in his dumb way to lead. Age had not robbed him of his brave heart, magnificent spirit, or a sense of direction. Somewhere in the swirling cloud of flakes the old dog was pushing ahead. Was it too late? Was he even now beyond recall?

"Arctic! Arctic!" she cried. "Come, old fellow! Arctic! Arctic!" The very silence seemed to mock her; the shroud enveloping the silent figure on the sled was deeper now, she noticed. "Arctic! Arctic!"

And then the curtain parted a few feet away and Arctic bounded to her feet. Every inch of the old pensioner's body bespoke the joy that had filled his heart at her call. "Let me show you the way," he seemed to plead, "those other dogs are nice young fellows, but they lack experience. Nothing like an old head at a time like this." She removed the harness from the lead dog, and slipped it onto Arctic. The old fellow was trembling in eagerness to be off. Patiently he waited her command.

"Mush on, Arctic!" she ordered in a low voice, and with bated breath awaited the result. He swung to the right with such speed as almost to upset the sled, taking a course almost opposite the one she had followed. Apparently the old fellow was in doubt, for he zigzagged uncertainly for several minutes, yet she did not interfere. At least, he could not make their situation any worse. The others, inspired by their former leader, seemed to take on new life. Tails that had been dragging, curled over woolly backs, and they speeded up to maintain a pace far too swift for the old pensioner—a pace he himself set.

And then, without preliminary warning, she suddenly felt a difference. It was al-

most too good to believe. Disappointed so many times, at first she refused to believe; yet there could be no doubt now. They were back on the old trail. With an angry cry she shook the shroud of snow from the robes covering Evans. "You shan't die! You shan't!"

WHEN the storm lifted some time later they had reached the opposite shore. New peaks reared abruptly about bewilderingly. A dozen routes were open apparently, but the wise old dog never even looked up. Twisting this way and that he tugged the sled to the top of a ridge, then over a level stretch and down into a valley. They reached an opening in the woods. Before them was a frozen river.

The pensioner had taxed his old body beyond the limit. Now he commenced to lag. A strained tendon caused him to limp pitifully at times. It was cruel to keep him at it now, yet she dare not change. At the forks of the river he headed up the south tributary. "No," she ordered with quick decision, "we must take the other to Grady's—an enemy! This must be the trail to his cabin. Gee, Arctic, gee!" But Arctic knew. He had not taken the North Fork trail in a year and he continued stubbornly toward home. "Gee, Arctic, gee!" Her tone was sharper now, but he ignored her. Then she ran to his head and caught hold of the harness. "Don't resist, old fellow!" she pleaded. "We must have help if we can get it. He's dying on that cold sled, perhaps we are too late, and I'm tired, so tired! Come on, Arctic!"

Obedience had been instilled from his puppy days. It was wrong to enter enemy territory, yet he obeyed. Followed a heart-breaking mile during which she staggered along, clinging desperately to the sled. It came at last—a faint yellow light shining through a cabin window. Unutterable thankfulness filled her heart a moment, then gave way to dread. What manner of man was this who hated Evans and all that was his; who could slay a tried and true friend like Arctic and feed him to the dogs? What sort of a bargain would he drive with a girl who came so suddenly from the night—the wife of his enemy? Then, as her lowered glance rested a moment on the still, snow-enshrouded figure, she knew in her heart she would accept any terms if it meant life for him.

Two of Grady's fierce brutes darted from the door the instant their master opened it. She caught a brief glimpse of his burly form and bearded face outlined in the yellow light; then her indomitable will faltered; silently she fell to the trail, a blurred picture in her mind of Grady's sharp-fanged Malemutes tearing at Arctic's defenseless sides.

EDITH opened her tired eyes slowly. A rough hand was gently stroking her own; a bearded face was close to hers. "It's all right, little lady!" a heavy voice was saying. "It's all right. There! There! Now, don't be afraid of me. You've had a mighty tough time of it."

"Archie," she whispered, "Archie."

"Oh, that old pirate will pull through; but you didn't get him here any too soon. I had to kick hell, pardon me, out of a couple of my brutes to keep 'em off old Arctic. Darn his old heart, anyway! He dropped in his tracks about the same time you did. Brought all three of you into the cabin, did what I could for Evans, then began on you."

Arctic limped across the room and placed his shaggy head in her lap, while she had a good cry over it. Grady found it convenient to cough at that moment; then he continued: "I knew the old fellow had pulled you through. He's too old to work like that, but he's not too old to enjoy a pension. Evans ought to have killed me that time. To-morrow I'll hook up my dogs and get your things. Might as well make your home here a couple of weeks until Evans gets well. It gets blame lonesome, and"—Grady managed to blush on that portion of his face not covered by his beard—"I've got a wife of my own coming up on the next boat; hope she don't have to face what you did; but if she does, then I'll pray that there's an old Malemute lead dog handy."

When Evans opened his eyes, he was brought to understand what had happened by a strong handclasp and a few broken words from the bearded man and the cry of happiness from the brave little wife who had stood the test.

The pensioner paused in his eating. "Humans are a queer lot," he observed sagely, then resumed his meal—a mixture of rice and soup, prepared specially by the bearded man for a loyal old Malemute who had lost all his teeth.





The **WHITE RIVER POST** is open to all readers of **COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL**. We encourage correspondence. Here, you will make new friends; perhaps thousands of miles away or right in your own home town. Send your letter in to us and we will print it in these pages. If you don't want your name and address to appear, sign your nickname and send address confidential to us and we will forward all answers to you. Let's hear what you think of this magazine. Address, Room 203, 100 Hudson St., N. Y. C.

White River "Pete."

#### A GUITAR PLAYING YODELER

Dear Pete:

I believe your magazine is the best there is. Besides reading your magazine I love to sing and yodel with my guitar. I have been singing and playing now for over six years. I know plenty of Western and blues songs. I will answer every letter I get. The first five letters I receive will get a souvenir from me.

BLUE YODELER,

#### FULL BLOODED IRISH WESTERNER

Dear "White River Pete":

I read your magazine and really think it's swell.

I would appreciate it very much if you would publish my plea for pen pals. I am a full blooded Irish Westerner, 17 years old, have dark brown hair, blue eyes and am 5 ft. 6 in. tall. I would like to hear from people all over the country, young or old. Especially the forest rangers as my uncle is an ex-forest ranger and am very much interested in that type work also would love to hear from rodeo riders as I love to ride myself. So please come on you boys and gals and sling some ink my way.

MISS ALICE BAUSTADT,

2116 So. Fawcett Ave.,  
Tacoma, Washington.

#### A MAN WITH A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Dear Pete:

I would like to join the White River Post. I always did like to hear about the Mounted Police and enjoy your stories about them.

I should like to correspond with someone of the purest Canadian-French stock who knows how to read and write English. I myself come from Canadian-French ancestors as far back as Jacques Cartier of 1535. Let me hear from those around St. Pierre, St. Jean, on the Isle-de-Orleans or in the neighborhood of the Sacred Romantic Place of Ste-de-Beaupre of old historical Quebec.

I am six feet tall, blue eyes, reddish brown hair, fair complexion, weigh 150 pounds, 29 years of age.

Come on, boys and girls of Quebec, write to someone who really wants to hear from you.

D. B. WADLEY,

Route 2, Box 30,  
Lexington, Tennessee.

I should also like to hear from Frenchy of Mass.

#### FOURTH TIME IS GOOD

Dear Pete:

This is my fourth attempt to get my letter into your mail bag.

I have been reading the **NORTHWEST NOVEL** for months now, and I find it one of the best.

I am a trooper in the Royal Horse Guards, "Blues," and am looking for Pen Pals from all over the world. My height is 6 ft. 2½ inches and I have curly auburn hair. My eyes are blue, and I have a cheerful disposition. I go in for all sports, but I excel at boxing, which is my favorite.

I am willing to exchange snaps and I promise to answer all letters. I have some really fine snaps of myself in our ceremonial uniforms. My age is only 21, so come along folks, and drop me a line.

Yours sincerely,

TROOPER HARRY HISLOP,

Royal Horse Guards,  
London, England.

#### SHE'S CONSIDERED PASSABLE

Dear "White River Pete":

May I join your ranks of Pen Pals? I live in a small city where nothing ever happens.

I am 17 years of age and am considered passable. I promise to make my letters all interesting.

Please print my plea, Pete? Thanks,  
Sincerely,

(MISS) FRANCES SRAMEK,

188 Sargent Ave.,  
Beacon, N. Y.

#### A DINOSAUR WRANGLER

Dear Pete:

Can you please welcome a lonely boy cowhand from away out West?

At present I am employed at the Dinosaur National Monument Camp at Jensen, Utah. Probably you have heard of these prehistoric animal bones.

I am a blue eyed brown head and 5 ft. 1½ ins. tall, weigh 157½ and am 21 years old.

I will answer all letters from U. S. Can answer a lot of questions and also tell a lot of our West and of these prehistoric animals. My home is still farther to the West some 100 miles.

So come on, Pen Pals, I want a lot of letters. Will answer all letters containing snaps first.

DON FOOTE,

P.O. Box 6,  
Jensen, Wintah County, Utah.

### SHE HAS A LOT OF INTERESTS

Dear Pete:

I enjoy NORTHWEST NOVEL so much. I am very interested in stories, both true and fictitious, of the Northwest Mounted Police and life in the far North.

May I become a member of the White River Post? I would like some Pen Pals. You'll help me, won't you, Pete?

Here is a word picture of me. I am a dark brunette, 5 ft. 1 in. in height, weight 125 lbs. I am 23 years old. I like to read, drive automobiles, do housework, type, hunt, hike, enjoy good shows, music, plays, and I like to travel. I am interested in people, new places, different occupations and hobbies. I have no special distinction that will make me outstanding but I'll do my best to make my letter interesting.

So please write all of you from the four points of the compass.

MARGIE.

### A NEW ZEALAND PEN PARD

My new pard "Pete":

I'd like to get some pals to write to in U. S. A. or Canada. Perhaps New Zealand is just another little blot on the map, to you people, but there are people living on these two Islands down here.

I'm hoping you won't find space too crowded in the "White River Post," to put in a little plea from me for some pen pals.

I reckon the "White River Post" and the whole of the "Northwest magazines" are great. I've always liked to read of the rivers and plains in the Northwest. I liked especially the story called "The Man of the North."

I am 5 ft. 11 inches in height, aged 16 and interested in photography, motor-bikes and camping. I would like to hear from chaps and girls from all over the world.

DAVE (SCRAGS) CLARK,

71 Tasman Street,  
Wellington, Wairarapa,  
New Zealand.

### MEN WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR DESIRED

Dear "White River Pete":

Through the medium of this department I would like to hear from a refined young man—or men—who possesses a sense of humor.

I am twenty-three years of age and have a variety of hobbies which includes a particular interest in people and places. My education and traveling experiences are limited but I still feel qualified to exchange ideas upon practically any subject which a prospective correspondent may advance.

If any gentleman would care to enlarge upon this brief introduction please address your letter to

RUBY,

c/o White River Pete.

### A BLONDE WITH BLUE EYES

Dear Pete:

I am a reader of your magazine and I enjoy it very much. I know, Pete, you will help me to find some Pen Pals, won't you?

I am a blonde with blue eyes. I am 5 ft. 3 in. tall and I weigh 120 lbs. My favorite hobbies are: Going to the movies, dancing, working, and writing letters. I have lots of friends both girls and boys, but I would like some True Pen Pals especially from the Western States. I would like to hear from everyone from the ages of 16 to 29 years.

I will exchange snapshots with the first boy and girl writing to me.

I am dying to hear from anyone living anywhere in the U. S. A.

Say, Pete, will you do me a favor, please, print my letter in the next month's issue.

Come on, everyone, write to me. I expect to answer all letters I receive.

MARY JANE KITTRIDGE,

619 Tisdale Ave.,  
Lansing, Mich.

### MEMBER OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE

Dear Pete:

Having read and enjoyed COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL several times, I am writing this in the hope that you might publish it.

I should very much like to hear from some American chaps or young ladies, and I thought, perhaps some of your readers might write to me.

I am 20 years of age, and am an airman in the Royal Air Force, at the moment stationed in England.

I really hail from London, but I have motored and hiked over most of the South of England, and I am sure I could write some interesting letters.

"KITNA,"

c/o Pete.

### BROOKLYN BOILERMAKER

Dear Pete:

I would surely like to hear from some Pen Pals of both sexes. I am 19 years of age, 5 ft. 10 in. tall, weight 145 lbs.

I have been a sailor and traveled to all kinds of places, but now I am a shipyard boilermaker.

I have brown wavy hair and dark blue eyes.

Although I live in New York at the present time I was born in Birmingham, Ala.

I will send snapshots to all who answer in exchange for some of their own.

Now come on all of you boys and girls and write to a lonely fellow.

RAYMOND HAMILTON,

106 Van Dyke St.,  
Brooklyn, N. Y.

### A 50-50 PEN PAL

Hi there, Pete:

I want to tell you that your magazine is great. I don't care much about reading but when I pick up a NORTHWEST NOVEL, well, I just let the rest of the world go by. Those stories like "Sergeant Terrible," and "Death Rides the River," they sure hit the spot when it comes to interesting stories.

I love to write and I wonder if it would be possible for you to get me a few true blue pen pals.

I guarantee to answer all letters received and I will write about anything and everything. That you know covers quite a territory. It makes no difference what the age or sex are. I will answer them.

Since different pals require different sorts of letters I use the questions asked and general trend of thought of letters received as an outline to my reply. The idea is to get acquainted and enjoy the intimacy of pen pal friendship via the ink y way.

So, come on now, all you 50-50 pen pals and sling some ink my way.

I will exchange snapshots with anyone.

Sincerely,

MARGARET KRAHN,

Harrison St.,  
Bartonville, Ill.

### LONESOME BILL, THE CAMERA MAN

Dear Pete:

I am young fellow from California. I am 24 years old, was born on October 12, 1912.

I am very fond of pals, but since I came to New York, I am fond of baseball, hockey and bicycle riding. Would like pen pals from all over the world.

I have traveled all over the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Will exchange photos.

Please let me know if I can join your club. Back home they call me "Lonesome Bill, the Camera Man" because I always carry a camera around everywhere I go.

Yours truly,

"LONESOME BILL LA SEURE,"

c/o Commercial Hotel,  
341 Broome Street,  
New York City, N. Y.

### "A LONELY WIDOW"

Dear Pete:

I am a widow, 21 years of age, weigh 136 lbs., 5 ft. 3 in. tall. Am blue-eyed, have auburn hair. Would like to join your post, and would like pen pals from the West. My hobbies are reading and writing letters and have lots of time for each as I haven't got any children, so I would like to hear from boys and girls about 23 years of age. Will answer all letters and exchange snaps. So, come on boys and write to a young lonely widow.

ERSA EVANS,

Route 5,  
McMinnville, Tennessee.

### HE'S INTERESTED IN COW-GIRLS

Dear Pete:

Maybe there's room for me in your Pen Pal Club. I would like to hear from some of the cow-girls of Canada. I promise to answer all letters and send them my photo.

I am 6 feet tall. I have dark brown hair, blue eyes and fresh complexion. My age is 18 years.

Well, Pete, I want to tell you that I think your magazine is marvelous.

So, come on, you Texas cow-girls, drop me a line and you won't regret it.

Yours until I come over.

P.T.E. R. WATKINS,

No. 4032386,  
X Coy, Whittington Bks.,  
Lichfield, England.

### NEW ZEALAND PEN PAL

Dear Pete:

I am a New Zealander, eighteen years of age. I would like pen friends, especially men, anywhere in any country. I would be pleased to exchange stamps and newspapers, so any of you Americans who are interested, please write to me.

Wishing your magazine every success.

MARGARET HAY,

Waitmo Caves, King Country,  
North Island, New Zealand.

### A COUPLE OF SCOTCH GIRLS

Dear Pete:

Scotland calling. We are two Scotch girls who would like pen pals from anyone between the North and the South Poles. We have traveled all over the British Isles, and would like to hear all about other places which we cannot visit.

One is a blonde, the other a brunette, so there will be no excuse for not writing even if you prefer blonde or brunette. Our hobbies are hiking, dancing, swimming and all kinds of sports, and the brunette collects snaps, so if you have any you can spare, send them. We are both 20 years old, but not particular of age of pen pals.

So here's hoping.

MAY HAMILTON,

MARY MULHOLLAND,

435D Main Street,  
Coatbridge, Scotland.

### HE'S TRAVELED AROUND THE WORLD

Here's Mine, Pete:

I'm looking for a few honest to goodness pals. Not just pen pals, but real pals. The kind you read about but don't meet very often.

I'm a fellow of 24, 5 feet 7 inches tall, about 148, dark brown hair and eyes and if people tell me the truth, am kind of handsome. But I am very lonesome even if I do live in a great city. I can't find any true pals. How about some of your readers who want a real pal, one who knows how to take it and who never lets a pal down.

I've been around the world and have plenty of action stories to tell to anyone who cares to correspond. I would like above all to hear from some gals about my own age or a little younger. But, please, only those that want a real pal. No fly-by-night correspondence once in a blue moon. I mean

business, so how about it. Glad to exchange photos also. Don't let down a lonely fellow seeking a few true pals. I can write on almost any subject and know how to write a nice letter, but when it comes to real friendship—well, just see for yourselves. Adios to all you readers and thanks a million to Pete and his "mag."

Sincerely,

TRUE PAL.

### SHE SAYS SHE'S BEAUTIFUL AND NOT CONCEITED

Dear Pete:

I think your magazine is wonderful. I am wondering if there will be room in your pages for this lonesome writer. I'm away from home, up in the hills of Kentucky, and am awful lonely. Would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world, especially from the West. I'm 5 feet 9 inches tall, have brown, curly hair, gray eyes. Am considered beautiful. I'm not conceited. I love all kinds of sports and excitement. If I sound interesting, please let me have a few letters and I'll tell you all about this wild state of Kentucky.

Now, Pete, don't disappoint me, print this in your next magazine and give a lonely girl a chance.

DREAMY.

### LONESOME NEW YORKER

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of NORTH-WESTERN MAGAZINE and sure enjoy it plenty as reading is one of my best pastimes.

Wonder if I could join the White River Post and have some of your readers write to me. I promise to faithfully answer all letters I receive. Am 27 years old, and live in the big city (New York). I'll bet a lot of readers don't believe a fellow could get lonesome in New York, but you sure can. I hope you will enter my letter and that I get so many letters I'll have to holler for help.

JOSEPH P. SIMMONS,

239 Ocean Ave.,  
Brooklyn, New York.

### SHE WANTS TO LEARN EMBALMING

White River Pete:

I enjoy writing letters, and so through the courtesy of the White River Post, I hope to receive many letters. In fact, I now write quite a few letters to folks in remote places as well as in the United States.

My hobbies are, first of all, letter writing, quilting, tatting and outdoors in the summer, whether it be in the woods, the beach, or just walks in the city.

Have a secret ambition to want to learn the embalming work, and so would greatly appreciate hearing from anyone doing that sort of work now, or intending to do it.

Am blonde, five feet four or five, weigh 145, fair complexion, blue eyes, and want never to grow too old to dream. Age is twenty-five. Will answer all letters received, and promptly, too. Suppose you have guessed by now, that I am a reader of NORTHWEST and fond of it, I'll say so.

BLONDIE.

### GRAY EYES, BLACK HAIR AND FAIR SKIN

Dear Pete:

I am a girl of 19 years, weigh 125 pounds, and stand 5 feet 3 inches. I have gray eyes, black hair and fair skin. I like to read very much and find the NORTHWEST NOVEL very interesting.

Will you please make it possible for me to have some pen pals by printing this request? Will all you boys and girls write to me and tell me of your interests, hobbies and hopes? I like to write letters and feel sure that I can interest you. So dash me off a few lines, and I will try to answer all letters.

Sincerely,  
"FRANCOIS."



## A WANDERING MINSTREL, HE

Dear Pete:

I, too, would like to have some pen pals. So many of the readers seem to want to hear about the see "the great open spaces." I don't blame them. I did, too. I went, I saw, was conquered. It's fine to travel. As long as you keep going. Usually when you stop there is one cause and many results. You stop because you're broke. Then your friends go seeking richer fields and the sheriffs say, "Move on." You have no work, no funds, and a big appetite at 7 o'clock, 12 o'clock and 6 o'clock. Few people indeed care to give you a handout. It's more fun for them to add to your misery by sticking the dog on you. People like to laugh at the expense and discomforts of others. I've been through the mill. Would I go again? Yes! For now I would prepare for emergencies. I make plans now and they include round trips.

Let me add, last but not least, that I have read COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL from cover to cover for sometime. It sure goes a long way to giving you an insight on life and the outlook. I wouldn't be without it. I'll like to hear from foreign countries and 48 states of the United States.

J. HOLLIS,

325 Thirty-first Street,  
McKeesport, Pa.

## A BACHELOR WITH PLENTY OF TIME

Dear Pete:

Will you please post this appeal for some sincere correspondents from folks of the older, quieter sort. Those past thirty more desired.

Am just another bachelor who has lots of time in the evenings to read and answer letters from far-away friends. My work is outside (driving) but my home interests are reading, writing, movies and making friends with all people who are interested enough to write me, both male and female. I like anything that grows, animals and plants, for I think life in any form is the most interesting process of our living and being alive.

Glad to hear from anyone; no section of our great country barred.

HOOSIER POET.

## BROWN EYED BRUNETTE

Dear Pete:

Can you find room for another new reader of your great magazine in your friendly post?

Right this way, everybody who wants a sincere pen pal. I am a girl 18 years young, a brunette with dark brown hair and eyes, fair complexion.

I love all sports, particularly swimming, skating, dancing, etc. My hobby is letter writing, and I promise interesting letters to all.

I promise to answer each and every letter (If I don't, you can sue me for breach of promise).

So, come on, boys and girls, and sling some of your ink down into Little Old Rhode Island. I will exchange pictures with everyone.

Please print this as soon as possible, Pete.  
"BROWNIE."

## THE VOICE OF THE YOUNGER GENERATION

Dear Pete:

I am a regular reader of the COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL and I would like to put a letter in the pen pals department. I would like a few pen pals between the ages of 14 yrs. to 16 yrs. of age. I prefer a lot of girls. Blondes, brunettes or redheads. I appeal to you to print this for me, Pete. My age is nearly sixteen years old. My address is

MR. J. HOLT,

23 Hanworth Terrace,  
Hounslow, Middlesex, England.

P.S. Would you please get me in touch with Miss Jeanne Waywood, Rolla, Kansas.

## CAN SOMEONE HELP HIM?

Dear Sir:

I like to have all the information you can possibly give me about the Northwest Mounted Police. I'd like to know the test required to get on the force and if you have to be a citizen of Canada. I'd like to know what amount of education is required and if anybody out of high school can join the force when they are old enough. I am fourteen years of age and when I am 22 I expect to join the Mounted Police of Canada. I'd like to have this information very much. Please see what you can do about it.

Thanking you very much.

ARTHUR H. SIMMONSON, JR.,

306 S. East Avenue,  
Baltimore, Maryland.

P.S.—I'd like to hear from other boys who are interested in the Mounted Police.

## HE HAS A COMPLAINT TO MAKE

Dear Pete:

May I make a complaint? It's not about your magazine—COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL is one of the best. But I have written to many people whose letters have appeared in this and other magazines and I'm wondering if they only want to see how many letters they can get without any intention of answering them. I'm sure that I can and do write some interesting letters. So, if any of you girls and boys, too, have failed to get your letters answered, then come on and let's keep the mails busy (both ways). I will exchange snaps with anyone who cares to do so.

Please put this in your earliest edition, Pete. I am 25 years old, 5 ft. 9 in., weigh 150 pounds, brown hair and blue gray eyes. I enjoy all sports and read lots. I have lots of time to write and enjoy getting and writing letters. So, you who really want to write, let me know your address.

Thank you, Pete, for helping a Pal get some Pals.

FRED M. JUSTICE,

212 Sowell Street,  
Brewton, Ala.

## STEWARD ON A TRANS-ATLANTIC STEAMER

Dear Pete:

I am a constant reader of your NORTHWEST NOVEL MAGAZINE and must say I have not yet met anything to beat it for western stories.

I wonder if you can find space for me in your White River Post.

I am anxious to find some Pen Pals, particularly in New York City, but will answer all letters.

I am a steward on a large trans-Atlantic liner and visit New York about every three weeks.

I am 28 years of age, 5 ft. 6 in. tall, weigh 142 lbs., have dark brown hair and blue eyes that know how to keep smiling.

Come on, girls, and let me hear from you.

DERRY J. BROPHY.

4. Oxford Avenue,  
Southampton, England.

## HIS MAJESTY'S ARMY IN INDIA

Dear Pete:

I have just finished reading one of your novels and think they are o.k. I am a lonely guy, so would like to get some pen pals from any part of the world, so would you print this letter for me. I am a British Squady on the Northwest frontier at India. Have traveled a great deal, so think I could write an interesting letter to anyone, both girls and boys of any age. I am 21 years old and weigh 165 lbs., height 5 ft. 10 in. and fond of all sport. So come on you ink slingers, let's hear from you. I will exchange snaps and answer all who write.

Yours,

G.N.R. POWELL, J.,

4th Light Battery,  
Razmak Camp, Waziristan,  
India, N. W. F.

# FOR SALE

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5 serrated fine tiny arrows.....	75¢	not \$1.00
10 large ancient arrowheads.....	65¢	not \$1.00
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1 tomahawk and 10 arrowheads.....	70¢	not \$1.00
12 different color nice arrowheads.....	70¢	not \$1.00
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2 fine Oregon gem points.....	65¢	not \$1.00
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5 ancient perfect drills.....	60¢	not \$1.00
One fine ancient spearhead.....	55¢	not \$1.00
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5 fine tiny ancient arrowheads.....	55¢	not \$1.00
20 good ancient tiny arrowheads.....	70¢	not \$1.00
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100 ancient assorted grave beads.....	55¢	not \$1.00
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## THE NORTHWEST TRADING POST

Here is where the readers of COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL can exchange something they have, but do not want, for something that someone else may have and that you may want. This is a free service, but your announcement must not exceed 28 words. It must be understood that COMPLETE NORTHWEST NOVEL is not responsible for losses sustained. Print your announcement clearly. Nothing but bona fide "swaps" will be inserted. No sales. Enclose clipping of this announcement with your "swap."

Want all types of barbell exercises and courses, book by Mark Berry, Tony Sansone, and other similar books. Have fine swaps. What's wanted? S. Kerr, 6899 Waldo, Detroit, Mich.

Want to exchange a beautiful moss agate, 1/2-in. long, for a Hawaiian guitar. Must be in good shape. Mrs. Clifford Neal, Clearwater, Nebr. R. No. 2.

Have powder ball pistol loading equipment in rosewood case. Will exchange for .32 S. & W. or Colt, police model. Must be A1 condition. Write Arthur W. Humphreys, 783 Warburton Ave., Yonkers, N. Y.

Will swap fossil snails for old watches or clocks which will not run, or anything of value. P. Gilbert, Jr., Gardner, Colo.

Trade stamps, banjo, basketball bladder, books, for stamps or what have you? Darylday, Box 115, Mantorville, Minn.

Have 12-gauge shotgun, 15 Jewel Elgin watch, woodsman's compass, midget radio, baby Brownie camera, U.S.A. regulation packback, hvy. web belt canteen, 2 loudspeakers, books. Want guns, printing press or what have you? S. Palasky, 12 School St., Port Wash., N. Y.

Have musical instruments, camera, field glasses, guns and several other articles to swap for solid gold jewelry or gold teeth. Satisfaction guaranteed. Jason Bowen, New Llano, Louisiana.

All kinds of books and magazines for trade for anything. Send list of what you have for my offers. D. Hanson, 519 Kaufman, Dubuque, Iowa.

Have p.c. courses, Bonomo, Jowetts, movie films, 16 and 35 mm. viewcards, novelties, books, magazines, stamps. Want same and match labels, traps, barbells, guitar. Lists exchanged. Leonard Weiser, 19 Fairview Ave., Schuylkill Haven, Pa.

Want 20 and 410, 20 woodsman and rifle, fishing tackle, casting and fly rod, good reel. Have stamps, watches, cameras, musical instruments, etc. What do you want? Edwin Anderson, Room 34, Exposition Hotel, Aurora, Ill.

Have you an outboard motor that you have no use for. I have a Remington 20 gauge pump gun model 17. Also pair of field glasses. A. Houghton, Canton, Ill.

Will swap a tenor banjo for a Harrington Richardson 22 automatic backbreak with a five inch barrel, practically new. Mr. Merle K. Williamson, Woodlawn, Illinois, R. R. No. 1.

22 & 38 S. & W. revolver, 12 gauge single shotgun, several battery radios and parts. in and out controlled spotlights, "Miter Saw" guide, 10 vols. Century Dictionary & Encyclopedia. Want woodworking tools and typewriter. J. R. Marks, R. 1, Painesville, Ohio.

Will trade stamps for stamps. Send me 100, 200 or 300 foreign stamps, and I will send you same. Albert Hamling, Jr., 9 Rossiter St., Gt. Barrington, Mass.

Have boxing gloves, flint rock, stamps, U.S. and foreign, coins, U.S. and foreign, covers, postmarks, arrowheads, battery radio parts, bull dog revolver, magazines, pamphlets, bullets, kodak pictures, many others. Send offers. J. Hollis, 325 31st St., McKeesport, Pa.

Have considerable duplicate colonial and foreign stamps, wish to swap for few early U.S.A. stamps. Leon S. Rooke, Windyridge, 16 Griffin Road, Erdington, Birmingham, England.

Will trade a 32 Republic automatic 7 shot for a Colt 25. C. A. Walter, New Corydon, Jay Co., Ind.

Trade cartridge belts and holsters, also pistols, for 33 special revolvers. J. Boswell, 33 Springdale Blvd., Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Have C-G Conn. trumpet, 12 gauge shotgun, T Ford parts. Want saxophone, piano accordion, tenor banjo with resonator, or? All letters answered with complete list. Harold C. Krueger, Ipswich, S. Dak.

Have 30, 06 Springfield, blued, no stock. Sole leather \$8 cartridge belt, 12 Munsey and International magazines, 1896 & 1897, slightly scorched, inside perfect. Want binoculars, fine reel, or flyfishing tackle. Paul F. Kropacek, 2348 Clarence Ave., Berwyn, Ill.

Wanted, old envelopes with stamps and postmarks affixed (1800 to 1890) Western Territorial postmarks. Old-time Westerners look for these. Cash or what do you want? R. B. Ellis, Box 753, Connellsville, Pa.

"The Printer's Helper"—back issues wanted. State number and year of each issue. All letters answered. Daniel Warsley, 318 Armstrong Ave., Jersey City, N. J.

Will swap beautiful portable Remington typewriter with case, valued at \$55 today. Still using first ribbon. I will swap this for a good conditioned canoe. Henry Troch, 48 Sobeski St., Peeley, Penna.

Trade stamps, foreign collectors. Have North and South America. Want all silver jubilees, or? J. P. Hammett, Box 1588, Dallas, Texas.

Wanted: stamps, unused or in good condition. Have stamps, books, "The Secret of the Ages," and assorted I.C.S. handbooks. Correspondents wanted from all countries. Michael Dubosh, 108 Center Street, Solvay, New York.

Have penknives, pipes, cards, dice, shaving cream, blades, ties, socks, jewelry, also silk stockings, perfumes, garters, powder, necklaces, earrings, manicure sets, beauty needs. Want U.S. and Commemorative coins. See other ads in Double Action mag. Hugh Grogan, 140-19 N. Y. Blvd., Jamaica, L. I., N. Y.

Have 900 used picture postcards and 300 second-hand keys of various types. Will trade whole or part for 22 rifle, revolver, or? Herman Krajewski, 94 West Main St., Rockville, Conn.

Gladioli bulbs, Hamilton 22 rifle, new air rifle, to exchange for stamp collection or Western magazines. L. C. Fuller, Waterville, Maine.

Want automatics and watches. Have mounted gray squirrel, barred owl, horned owl, prairie hawk, lady's engagement ring, garnet set ring, taxidermy course, bed lamp, desk fountain pen, compass. Donald Hamilton, East Liberty, Ohio.

Have 32 single Sevens target rifle, hunting knife, French colony stamps, boys' magazines. Want revolvers, repeating rifles, field glasses, wrist watch, washing machine or motorcycle engine. Write Sherrod Hanson, Box 14, Loomis, Nebraska.

Trade course in taxidermy, 40 lessons and 15 new steel hide stretchers, for old guns in good shape. All letters answered. Perry F. Lown, Castle Creek, N. Y.

Swap fine muzzle loading double barrel shotgun, old army sword and case, for muzzle loading Colt revolver in good condition. R. Linville, 147 Vienna Ave., Niles, Ohio.

Have a 38-40 Winchester, single shot, lever action, very old and rare, but in good shooting condition. Want auto. 32 Colt or 45. L. Johnson, Aneta, N. Dak.

Send me 1 old U.S. coin (any except small cent) and receive a rubber \$5 and \$10 joke bill. First exchange from each state, 1 extra bill included. Wm. A. Burns, 720 1/2 So. Grand, Enid, Okla.

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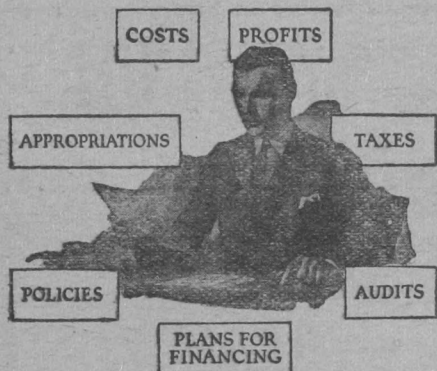
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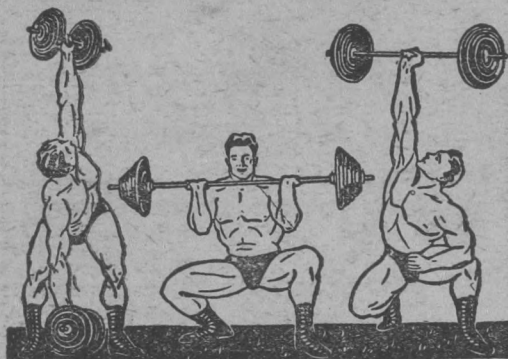


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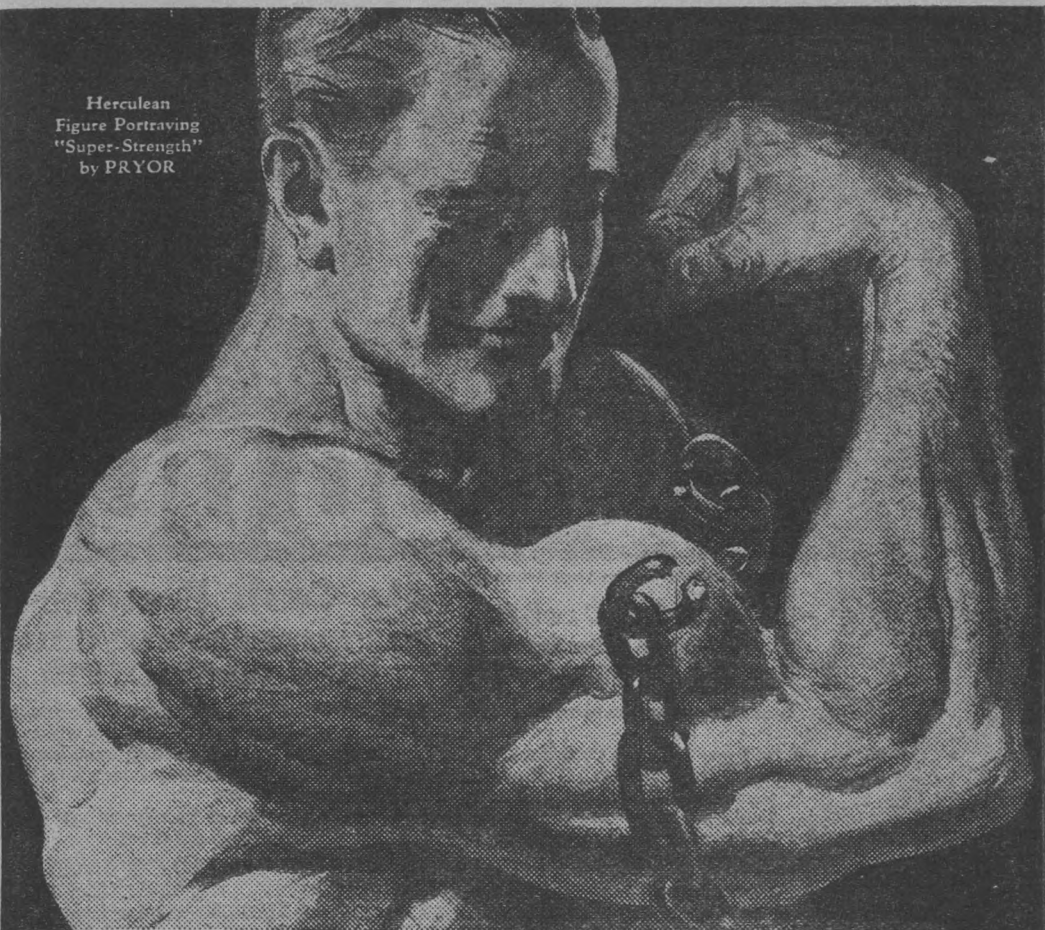


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**ME FOR A WEIL BELT IT CERTAINLY HAS WORKED WONDERS FOR YOU**

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I feel sure that you will be interested to know that I wore one of your belts for seven months and reduced from 44 to 36 inches.  
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