

Curwood James Oliver

The Country Beyond: A Romance of the Wilderness



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James Oliver Curwood

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CHAPTER I

Not far from the rugged and storm-whipped north shore of Lake Superior, and south of the Kaministiquia, yet not as far south as the Rainy River waterway, there lay a paradise lost in the heart of a wilderness world – and in that paradise "a little corner of hell."

That was what the girl had called it once upon a time, when sobbing out the shame and the agony of it to herself. That was before Peter had come to leaven the drab of her life. But the hell was still there.

One would not have guessed its existence, standing at the bald top of Cragg's Ridge this wonderful thirtieth day of May. In the whiteness of winter one could look off over a hundred square miles of freezing forest and swamp and river country, with the gleam of ice-covered lakes here and there, fringed by their black spruce and cedar and balsam – a country of storm, of deep snows, and men and women whose blood ran red with the thrill that the hardship and the never-ending adventure of the wild.

But this was spring. And such a spring as had not come to the Canadian north country in many years. Until three days ago there had been a deluge of warm rains, and since then the sun had inundated the land with the golden warmth of summer. The last chill was gone from the air, and the last bit of frozen earth and muck from the deepest and blackest swamps, North, south, east and west the wilderness world was a glory of bursting life, of springtime mellowing into summer. Ridge upon ridge of yellows and greens and blacks swept away into the unknown distances like the billows of a vast sea; and between them lay the valleys and swamps, the lakes and waterways, glad with the rippling song of running waters, the sweet scents of early flowering time, and the joyous voice of all mating creatures.

Just under Cragg's Ridge lay the paradise, a meadow-like sweep of plain that reached down to the edge of Clearwater Lake, with clumps of poplars and white birch and darker tapestries of spruce and balsams dotting it like islets in a sea of verdant green. The flowers were two weeks ahead of their time and the sweet perfumes of late June, instead of May, rose up out of the plain, and already there was nesting in the velvety splashes of timber.

In the edge of a clump of this timber, flat on his belly, lay Peter. The love of adventure was in him, and today he had sallied forth on his most desperate enterprise. For the first time he had gone alone to the edge of Clearwater Lake, half a mile away; boldly he had trotted up and down the white strip of beach where the girl's footprints still remained in the sand, and defiantly he had yipped at the shimmering vastness of the water, and at the white gulls circling near him in quest of dead fish flung ashore. Peter was three months old. Yesterday he had been a timid pup, shrinking from the bigness and strangeness of everything about him; but today he had braved the lake trail on his own nerve, and nothing had dared to come near him in spite of his yipping, so that a great courage and a great desire were born in him.

Therefore, in returning, he had paused in the edge of a great clump of balsams and spruce, and lay flat on his belly, his sharp little eyes leveled yearningly at the black mystery of its deeper shadows. The bit of forest filled a cup-like depression in the plain, and was possibly half a rifle-shot distance from end to end – but to Peter it was as vast as life itself. And something urged him to go in.

And as he lay there, desire and indecision struggling for mastery within him, no power could have told Peter that destinies greater than his own were working through the soul of the dog that was in him, and that on his decision to go in or not to go in – on the triumph of courage or cowardice – there rested the fates of lives greater than his own, of men, and women, and of little children still unborn. A glass of wine once lost a kingdom, a nail turned the tide of a mighty battle, and a woman's smile once upon a time destroyed the homes of a million people. Thus have trivial things played their potent parts in the history of human lives, yet these things Peter did not know – nor that his greatest hour had come.

At last he rose from his squatting posture, and stood upon his feet. He was not a beautiful pup, this Peter *Pied-Bot* – or Peter Club-foot, as Jolly Roger McKay – who lived over in the big cedar swamp – had named him when he gave Peter to the girl. He was, in a way, an accident and a homely one at that. His father was a blue-blooded fighting Airedale who had broken from his kennel long enough to commit a *mesalliance* with a huge big footed and peace-loving Mackenzie hound – and Peter was the result. He wore the fiercely bristling whiskers of his Airedale father at the age of three months; his ears were flappy and big, his tail was knotted, and his legs were ungainly and loose, with huge feet at the end of them – so big and heavy that he stumbled frequently, and fell on his nose. One pitied him at first – and then loved him. For Peter, in spite of his homeliness, had the two best bloods of all dog creation in his veins. Yet in a way it was like mixing nitro-glycerin with olive oil, or dynamite and saltpeter with milk and honey.

Peter's heart was thumping rapidly as he took a step toward the deeper shadows. He swallowed hard, as if to clear a knot out of his scrawny throat. But he had made up his mind. Something was compelling him, and he would go in. Slowly the gloom engulfed him, and once again the whimsical spirit of fatalism had chosen a trivial thing to work out its ends in the romance and tragedy of human lives.

Grim shadows began to surround Peter, and his ears shot up, and a scraggly brush stood out along his spine. But he did not bark, as he had barked along the shore of the lake, and in the green opens. Twice he looked back to the shimmer of sunshine that was growing more and more indistinct. As long as he could see this, and knew that his retreat was open, there still remained a bit of that courage which was swiftly ebbing in the thickening darkness. But the third time he looked back the light of the sun was utterly gone! For an instant the knot rose up in his throat and choked him, and his eyes popped, and grew like little balls of fire in his intense desire to see through the gloom. Even the girl, who was afraid of only one thing in the world, would have paused where Peter stood, with a little quickening of her heart. For all the light of the day, it seemed to Peter, had suddenly died out. Over his head the spruce and cedar and balsam tops grew so thick they were like a canopy of night. Through them the snow never came in winter, and under them the light of a blazing sun was only a ghostly twilight.

And now, as he stood there, his whole soul burning with a desire to see his way out, Peter began to hear strange sounds. Strangest of all, and most fearsome, was a hissing that came and went, sometimes very near to him, and always accompanied by a grating noise that curdled his blood. Twice after that he saw the shadow of the great owl as it swooped over him, and he flattened himself down, the knot in his throat growing bigger and more choking. And then he heard the soft and uncanny movement of huge feathered bodies in the thick shroud of boughs overhead, and slowly and cautiously he wormed himself around, determined to get back to sunshine and day as quickly as he could. It was not until he had made this movement that the real chill of horror gripped at his heart. Straight behind him, directly in the path he had traveled, he saw two little green balls of flame!

It was instinct, and not reason or experience, which told Peter there was menace and peril in these two tiny spots blazing in the gloom. He did not know that his own eyes, popping half out of his head, were equally terrifying in that pit of silence, nor that from him emanated a still more terrifying thing – the scent of dog. He trembled on his wobbly legs as the green eyes stared at him, and his back

seemed to break in the middle, so that he sank helplessly down upon the soft spruce needles, waiting for his doom. In another flash the twin balls of green fire were gone. In a moment they appeared again, a little farther away. Then a second time they were gone, and a third time they flashed back at him – so distant they appeared like needle-points in the darkness. Something stupendous rose up in Peter. It was the soul of his Airedale father, telling him the other thing was running away! And in the joy of triumph Peter let out a yelp. In that night-infested place, alive with hiding things, the yelp set loose weird rustlings in the tangled treetops, strange murmurings of chortling voices, and the nasty snapping of beaks that held in them the power to rend Peter's skinny body into a hundred bits. From deeper in the thicket came the sudden crash of a heavy body, and with it the chuckling notes of a porcupine, and a *hoo-hoo-hoo-ee* of startled inquiry that at first Peter took for a human voice. And again he lay shivering close to the foot-deep carpet of needles under him, while his heart thumped against his ribs, and his whiskers stood out in mortal fear. There followed a weird and appalling silence, and in that stillness Peter quested vainly for the sunlight he had lost. And then, indistinctly, but bringing with it a new thrill, he heard another sound. It was a soft and distant rippling of running water. He knew that sound. It was friendly. He had played among the rocks and pebbles and sand where it was made. His courage came back, and he rose up on his legs, and made his way toward it. Something inside him told him to go quietly, but his feet were big and clumsy, and half a dozen times in the next two minutes he stumbled on his nose. At last he came to the stream, scarcely wider than a man might have reached across, rippling and plashing its way through the naked roots of trees. And ahead of him Peter saw light. He quickened his pace, until at the last he was running when he came out into the edge of the meadowy plain, with its sweetness of flowers and green grass and song of birds, and its glory of blue sky and sun.

If he had ever been afraid, Peter forgot it now. The choking went out of his throat, his heart fell back in its place, and the fierce conviction that he had vanquished everything in the world possessed him. He peered back into the dark cavern of evergreen out of which the streamlet gurgled, and then trotted straight away from it, growling back his defiance as he ran. At a safe distance he stopped, and faced about. Nothing was following him, and the importance of his achievements grew upon him. He began to swell; his fore-legs he planted pugnaciously, he hollowed his back, and began to bark with all the puppyish ferocity that was in him. And though he continued to yelp, and pounded the earth with his paws, and tore up the green grass with his sharp little teeth, nothing dared to come out of the black forest in answer to his challenge!

His head was high and his ears cocked jauntily as he trotted up the slope, and for the first time in his three months of existence he yearned to give battle to something that was alive. He was a changed Peter, no longer satisfied with the thought of gnawing sticks or stones or mauling a rabbit skin. At the crest of the slope he stopped, and yelped down, almost determined to go back to that black patch of forest and chase out everything that was in it. Then he turned toward Cragg's Ridge, and what he saw seemed slowly to shrink up the pugnaciousness that was in him, and his stiffened tail drooped until the knotty end of it touched the ground.

Three or four hundred yards away, out of the heart of that cup-like paradise which ran back through a break in the ridge, rose a spiral of white smoke, and with the sight of that smoke Peter heard also the chopping of axe. It made him shiver, and yet he made his way toward it. He was not old enough – nor was it in the gentle blood of his Mackenzie mother – to know the meaning of hate; but something was growing swiftly in Peter's shrewd little head, and he sensed impending danger whenever he heard the sound of the axe. For always there was associated with that sound the cat-like, thin-faced man with the red bristle on his upper lip, and the one eye that never opened but was always closed. And Peter had come to fear this one eyed man more than he feared any of the ghostly monsters hidden in the black pit of the forest he had braved that day.

But the owls, and the porcupine, and the fiery-eyed fox that had run away from him, had put into Peter something which was not in him yesterday, and he did not slink on his belly when he

came to the edge of the cup between the broken ridge, but stood up boldly on his crooked legs and looked ahead of him. At the far edge of the cup, under the western shoulder of the ridge, was a thick scattering of tall cedars and green poplars and white birch, and in the shelter of these was a cabin built of logs. A lovelier spot could not have been chosen for the home of man. The hollow, from where Peter stood, was a velvety carpet of green, thickly strewn with flowers and ferns, sweet with the scent of violets and wild honey-suckle, and filled with the song of birds. Through the middle of it purred a tiny creek which disappeared between the ragged shoulders of rock, and close to this creek stood the cabin, its log walls smothered under a luxuriant growth of wood-vine. But Peter's quizzical little eyes were not measuring the beauty of the place, nor were his ears listening to the singing of birds, or the chattering of a red-squirrel on a stub a few yards away. He was looking beyond the cabin, to a chalk-white mass of rock that rose like a giant mushroom in the edge of the trees – and he was listening to the ringing of the axe, and straining his ears to catch the sound of a voice.

It was the voice he wanted most of all, and when this did not come he choked back a whimper in his throat, and went down to the creek, and waded through it, and came up cautiously behind the cabin, his eyes and ears alert and his loosely jointed legs ready for flight at a sign of danger. He wanted to set up his sharp yipping signal for the girl, but the menace of the axe choked back his desire. At the very end of the cabin, where the wood-vine grew thick and dense, Peter had burrowed himself a hiding-place, and into this he skulked with the quickness of a rat getting away from its enemies. From this protecting screen he cautiously poked forth his whiskered face, to make what inventory he could of his chances for supper and a safe home-coming.

And as he looked forth his heart gave a sudden jump.

It was the girl, and not the man who was using the axe today. At the big wood-pile half a stone's throw away he saw the shimmer of her brown curls in the sun, and a glimpse of her white face as it was turned for an instant toward the cabin. In his gladness he would have leaped out, but the curse of a voice he had learned to dread held him back.

A man had come out of the cabin, and close behind the man, a woman. The man was a long, lean, cadaverous-faced creature, and Peter knew that the devil was in him as he stood there at the cabin door. His breath, if one had stood close enough to smell it, was heavy with whiskey. Tobacco juice stained the corners of his mouth, and his one eye gleamed with an animal-like exultation as he nodded toward the girl with the shining curls

"Mooney says he'll pay seven-fifty for her when he gets his tie-money from the Government, an' he paid me fifty down," he said. "It'll help pay for the brat's board these last ten years – an' mebbly, when it comes to a show-down, I can stick him for a thousand."

The woman made no answer. She was, in a way, past answering with a mind of her own. The man, as he stood there, was wicked and cruel, every line in his ugly face and angular body a line of sin. The woman was bent, broken, a wreck. In her face there was no sign of a living soul. Her eyes were dull, her heart burned out, her hands gnarled with toil under the slavery of a beast. Yet even Peter, quiet as a mouse where he lay, sensed the difference between them. He had seen the girl and this woman sobbing in each other's arms. And often he had crawled to the woman's feet, and occasionally her hand had touched him, and frequently she had given him things to eat. But it was seldom he heard her voice when the man was near.

The man was biting off a chunk of black tobacco. Suddenly he asked,

"How old is she, Liz?"

And the woman answered in a strange and husky voice.

"Seventeen the twelfth day of this month."

The man spat.

"Mooney ought to pay a thousand. We've had her better'n ten years – an' Mooney's crazy as a loon to git her. He'll pay!"

"Jed – " The woman's voice rose above its hoarseness. "Jed – it ain't right!"

The man laughed. He opened his mouth wide, until his yellow fangs gleamed in the sun, and the girl with the axe paused for a moment in her work, and flung back her head, staring at the two before the cabin door.

"Right?" jeered the man. "Right? That's what you been preachin' me these last ten years 'bout whiskey-runnin,' but it ain't made me stop sellin' whiskey, has it? An' I guess it ain't a word that'll come between Mooney and me – not if Mooney gits his thousand." Suddenly he turned upon her, a hand half raised to strike. "An' if you whisper a word to her – if y' double-cross me so much as the length of your little finger – I'll break every bone in your body, so help me God! You understand? You won't say anything to her?"

The woman's uneven shoulders drooped lower.

"I won't say ennything, Jed. I – promise."

The man dropped his uplifted hand with a harsh grunt.

"I'll kill y' if you do," he warned.

The girl had dropped her axe, and was coming toward them. She was a slim, bird-like creature, with a poise to her head and an up-tilt to her chin which warned that the man had not yet beaten her to the level of the woman. She was dressed in a faded calico, frayed at the bottom, and with the sleeves bobbed off just above the elbows of her slim white arms. Her stockings were mottled with patches and mends, and her shoes were old, and worn out at the toes.

But to Peter, worshipping her from his hiding place, she was the most beautiful thing in the world. Jolly Roger had said the same thing, and most men – and women, too – would have agreed that this slip of a girl possessed a beauty which it would take a long time for unhappiness and torture to crush entirely out of her. Her eyes were as blue as the violets Peter had thrust his nose among that day. And her hair was a glory, loosed by her exertion from its bondage of faded ribbon, and falling about her shoulders and nearly to her waist in a mass of curling brown tresses that at times had made even Jed Hawkins' one eye light of with admiration. And yet, even in those times, he hated her, and more than once his bony fingers had closed viciously in that mass of radiant hair, but seldom could he wring a scream of pain from Nada. Even now, when she could see the light of the devil in his one gleaming eye, it was only her flesh – and not her soul – that was afraid.

But the strain had begun to show its mark. In the blue of her eyes was the look of one who was never free of haunting visions, her cheeks were pallid, and a little too thin, and the vivid redness of her lips was not of health and happiness, but a touch of the color which should have been in her face, and which until now had refused to die.

She faced the man, a little out of the reach of his arm.

"I told you never again to raise your hand to strike her," she cried in a fierce, suppressed little voice, her blue eyes flaming loathing and hatred at him. "If you hit her once more – something is going to happen. If you want to hit anyone, hit me. I kin stand it. But – look at her! You've broken her shoulder, you've crippled her – an' you oughta die!"

The man advanced half a step, his eye ablaze. Deep down in him Peter felt something he had never felt before. For the first time in his life he had no desire to run away from the man. Something rose up from his bony little chest, and grew in his throat, until it was a babyish snarl so low that no human ears could hear it. And in his hiding-place his needle-like fangs gleamed under snarling lips.

But the man did not strike, nor did he reach out to grip his fingers in the silken mass of Nada's hair. He laughed, as if something was choking him, and turned away with a toss of his arms.

"You ain't seein' me hit her any more, are you, Nady?" he said, and disappeared around the end of the cabin.

The girl laid a hand on the woman's arm. Her eyes softened, but she was trembling.

"I've told him what'll happen, an' he won't dare hit you any more," she comforted. "If he does, I'll end him. I will! I'll bring the police. I'll show 'em the places where he hides his whiskey. I'll – I'll put him in jail, if I die for it!"

The woman's bony hands clutched at one of Nada's.

"No, no, you mustn't do that," she pleaded. "He was good to me once, a long time ago, Nada. It ain't Jed that's bad – it's the whiskey. You mustn't tell on him, Nada – you mustn't!"

"I've promised you I won't – if he don't hit you any more. He kin shake me by the hair if he wants to. But if he hits you – "

She drew a deep breath, and also passed around the end of the cabin.

For a few moments Peter listened. Then he slipped back through the tunnel he had made under the wood-vine, and saw Nada walking swiftly toward the break in the ridge. He followed, so quietly that she was through the break, and was picking her way among the tumbled masses of rock along the farther foot of the ridge, before she discovered his presence. With a glad cry she caught him up in her arms and hugged him against her breast.

"Peter, Peter, where have you been?" she demanded. "I thought something had happened to you, and I've been huntin' for you, and so has Roger – I mean Mister Jolly Roger."

Peter was hugged tighter, and he hung limply until his mistress came to a thick little clump of dwarf balsams hidden among the rocks. It was their "secret place," and Peter had come to sense the fact that its mystery was not to be disclosed. Here Nada had made her little bower, and she sat down now upon a thick rug of balsam boughs, and held Peter out in front of her, squatted on his haunches. A new light had come into her eyes, and they were shining like stars. There was a flush in her cheeks, her red lips were parted, and Peter, looking up – and being just dog – could scarcely measure the beauty of her. But he knew that something had happened, and he tried hard to understand.

"Peter, he was here ag'in today – Mister Roger – Mister Jolly Roger," she cried softly, the pink in her cheeks growing brighter. "And he told me I was pretty!"

She drew a deep breath, and looked out over the rocks to the valley and the black forest beyond. And her fingers, under Peter's scrawny armpits, tightened until he grunted.

"And he asked me if he could touch my hair – mind you he asked me that, Peter! – And when I said 'yes' he just put his hand on it, as if he was afraid, and he said it was beautiful, and that I must take wonderful care of it!"

Peter saw a throbbing in her throat.

"Peter – he said he didn't want to do anything wrong to me, that he'd cut off his hand first. He said that! And then he said – if I didn't think it was wrong – he'd like to kiss me – "

She hugged Peter up close to her again.

"And – I told him I guessed it wasn't wrong, because I liked him, and nobody else had ever kissed me, and – Peter – he didn't kiss me! And when he went away he looked so queer – so white-like – and somethin' inside me has been singing ever since. I don't know what it is, Peter. But it's there!"

And then, after a moment.

"Peter," she whispered, "I wish Mister Jolly Roger would take us away!"

The thought drew a tightening to her lips, and the pucker of a frown between her eyes, and she sat Peter down beside her and looked over the valley to the black forest, in the heart of which was Jolly Roger's cabin.

"It's funny he don't want anybody to know he's there, ain't it – I mean – isn't it, Peter?" she mused. "He's livin' in the old shack Indian Tom died in last winter, and I've promised not to tell. He says it's a great secret, and that only you, and I, and the Missioner over at Sucker Creek know anything about it. I'd like to go over and clean up the shack for him. I sure would."

Peter, beginning to nose among the rocks, did not see the flash of fire that came slowly into the blue of the girl's eyes. She was looking at her ragged shoes, at the patched stockings, at the poverty of her faded dress, and her fingers clenched in her lap.

"I'd do it – I'd go away – somewhere – and never come back, if it wasn't for her," she breathed. "She treats me like a witch most of the time, but Jed Hawkins made her that way. I kin remember – "

Suddenly she jumped up, and flung back her head defiantly, so that her hair streamed out in a sun-filled cloud in a gust of wind that came up the valley.

"Some day, I'll kill 'im," she cried to the black forest across the plain. "Some day – I will!"

CHAPTER II

She followed Peter. For a long time the storm had been gathering in her brain, a storm which she had held back, smothered under her unhappiness, so that only Peter had seen the lightning-flashes of it. But today the betrayal had forced itself from her lips, and in a hard little voice she had told Jolly Roger – the stranger who had come into the black forest – how her mother and father had died of the same plague more than ten years ago, and how Jed Hawkins and his woman had promised to keep her for three silver fox skins which her father had caught before the sickness came. That much the woman had confided in her, for she was only six when it happened. And she had not dared to look at Jolly Roger when she told him of what had passed since then, so she saw little of the hardening in his face as he listened. But he had blown his nose – hard. It was a way with Jolly Roger, and she had not known him long enough to understand what it meant. And a little later he had asked her if he might touch her hair – and his big hand had lain for a moment on her head, as gently as a woman's.

Like a warm glow in her heart still remained the touch of that hand. It had given her a new courage, and a new thrill, just as Peter's vanquishment of unknown monsters that day had done the same for him. Peter was no longer afraid, and the girl was no longer afraid, and together they went along the slope of the ridge, until they came to a dried-up coulee which was choked with a wild upheaval of rock. Here Peter suddenly stopped, with his nose to the ground, and then his legs stiffened, and for the first time the girl heard the babyish growl in his throat. For a moment she stood very still, and listened, and faintly there came to her a sound, as if someone was scraping rock against rock. The girl drew in a quick breath; she stood straighter, and Peter – looking up – saw her eyes flashing, and her lips apart. And then she bent down, and picked up a jagged stick.

"We'll go up, Peter," she whispered. "It's one of his hiding-places!"

There was a wonderful thrill in the knowledge that she was no longer afraid, and the same thrill was in Peter's swiftly beating little heart as he followed her. They went very quietly, the girl on tip-toe, and Peter making no sound with his soft footpads, so that Jed Hawkins was still on his knees, with his back toward them, when they came out into a square of pebbles and sand between two giant masses of rock. Yesterday, or the day before, both Peter and Nada would have slunk back, for Jed was at his devil's work, and only evil could come to the one who discovered him at it. He had scooped out a pile of sand from under the edge of the biggest rock, and was filling half a dozen grimy leather flasks from a jug which he had pulled from the hole. And then he paused to drink. They could hear the liquor gurgling down his throat.

Nada tapped the end of her stick against the rock, and like a shot the man whirled about to face them. His face turned livid when he saw who it was, and he drew himself up until he stood on his feet, his two big fists clenched, his yellow teeth snarling at her.

"You damned – spy!" he cried chokingly. "If you was a man – I'd kill you!"

The girl did not shrink. Her face did not whiten. Two bright spots flamed in her cheeks, and Hawkins saw the triumph shining in her eyes. And there was a new thing in the odd twist of her red lips, as she said tauntingly.

"If I was a man, Jed Hawkins – you'd run!"

He took a step toward her.

"You'd run," she repeated, meeting him squarely, and taking a tighter grip of her stick. "I ain't ever seen you hit anything but a woman, an' a girl, or some poor animal that didn't dare bite back. You're a coward, Jed Hawkins, a low-down, sneakin', whiskey-sellin' coward – and you oughta die!"

Even Peter sensed the cataclysmic change that had come in this moment between the two big rocks. It held something in the air, like the impending crash of dynamite, or the falling down of the world. He forgot himself, and looked up at his mistress, a wonderful, slim little thing standing there at last unafraid before the future – and in his dog heart and soul a part of the truth came to him, and

he planted his big feet squarely in front of Jed Hawkins, and snarled at him as he had never snarled before in his life.

And the bootlegger, for a moment, was stunned, For a while back he had humored the girl a little, to hold her in peace and without suspicion until Mooney was able to turn over her body-money. After that – after he had delivered her to the other's shack – it would all be up to Mooney, he figured. And this was what had come of his peace-loving efforts! She was taking advantage of him, defying him, spying upon him – the brat he had fed and brought up for ten years! Her beauty as she stood there did not hold him back. It was punishment she needed, a beating, a hair-pulling, until there was no breath left in her impudent body. He sprang forward, and Peter let out a wild yip as he saw Nada raise her stick. But she was a moment too slow. The man's hand caught it, and his right hand shot forward and buried itself in the thick, soft mass of her hair.

It was then that something broke loose in Peter. For this day, this hour, this minute the gods of destiny had given him birth. All things in the world were blotted out for him except one – the six inches of naked shank between the bootlegger's trouser-leg and his shoe. He dove in. His white teeth, sharp as stiletto-points, sank into it. And a wild and terrible yell came from Jed Hawkins as he loosed the girl's hair. Peter heard the yell, and his teeth sank deeper in the flesh of the first thing he had ever hated. It was the girl, more than Peter, who realized the horror of what followed. The man bent down and his powerful fingers closed round Peter's scrawny neck, and Peter felt his wind suddenly shut off, and his mouth opened. Then Jed Hawkins drew back the arm that held him, as he would have drawn it back to fling a stone.

With a scream the girl tore at him as his arm straightened out, and Peter went hurtling through the air. Her stick struck him fiercely across the face, and in that same moment there was a sickening, crushing thud as Peter's loosely-jointed little body struck against the face of the great rock. When Nada turned Peter was groveling in the sand, his hips and back broken down, but his bright eyes were on her, and without a whimper or a whine he was struggling to drag himself toward her. Only Jolly Roger could tell the story of how Peter's mother had died for a woman, and in this moment it must have been that her spirit entered into Peter's soul, for the pain of his terrible hurt was forgotten in his desire to drag himself back to the feet of the girl, and die facing her enemy – the man. He did not know that he was dragging his broken body only an inch at a time through the sand. But the girl saw the terrible truth, and with a cry of agony which all of Hawkin's torture could not have wrung from her she ran to him, and fell upon her knees, and gathered him tenderly in her arms. Then, in a flash, she was on her feet, facing Jed Hawkins like a little demon.

"For that – I'll kill you!" she panted. "I will. I'll kill you!"

The blow of her stick had half blinded the bootlegger's one eye, but he was coming toward her. Swift as a bird Nada turned and ran, and as the man's footsteps crunched in the gravel and rock behind her a wild fear possessed her – fear for Peter, and not for herself. Very soon Hawkins was left behind, cursing at the futility of the pursuit, and at the fate that had robbed him of an eye.

Down the coulee and out into the green meadowland of the plain ran Nada, her hair streaming brightly in the sun, her arms clutching Peter to her breast. Peter was whimpering now, crying softly and piteously, just as once upon a time she had heard a baby cry – a little baby that was dying. And her soul cried out in agony, for she knew that Peter, too, was dying. And as she stumbled onward – on toward the black forest, she put her face down to Peter and sobbed over and over again his name.

"Peter – Peter – Peter – "

And Peter, joyous and grateful for her love and the sound of her voice even in these moments, thrust out his tongue and caressed her cheek, and the girl's breath came in a great sob as she staggered on.

"It's all right now, Peter," she crooned. "It's all right, baby. He won't hurt you any more, an' we're goin' across the creek to Mister Roger's cabin, an' you'll be happy there. You'll be happy – "

Her voice choked full, and her mother-heart seemed to break inside her, just as life had gone out of that other mother's heart when the baby died. For their grief, in God's reckoning of things, was the same; and little Peter, sensing the greatness of this thing that had made them one in flesh and blood, snuggled his wiry face closer in her neck, crying softly to her, and content to die there close to the warmth of the creature he loved.

"Don't cry, baby," she soothed. "Don't cry, Peter, dear. It'll soon be all right – all right – " And the sob came again into her throat, and clung there like a choking fist, until they came to the edge of the big forest.

She looked down, and saw that Peter's eyes were closed; and not until then did the miracle of understanding come upon her fully that there was no difference at all between the dying baby's face and dying Peter's, except that one had been white and soft, and Peter's was different – and covered with hair.

"God'll take care o' you, Peter," she whispered. "He will – God, 'n' me, and Mister Roger – "

She knew there was untruth in what she was saying for no one, not even God, would ever take care of Peter again – in life. His still little face and the terrible grief in her own heart told her that. For Peter's back was broken, and he was going – going even now – as she ran moaningly with him through the deep aisles of the forest. But before he died, before his heart stopped beating in her arms, she wanted to reach Jolly Roger's friendly cabin, in the big swamp beyond the creek. It was not that he could save Peter, but something told her that Jolly Roger's presence would make Peter's dying easier, both for Peter and for her, for in this first glad spring of her existence the stranger in the forest shack had brought sunshine and hope and new dreams into her life; and they had set him up, she and Peter, as they would have set up a god on a shrine.

So she ran for the fording place on Sucker Creek, which was a good half mile above the shack in which the stranger was living. She was staggering, and short of wind, when she came to the ford, and when she saw the whirl and rush of water ahead of her she remembered what Jolly Roger had said about the flooding of the creek, and her eyes widened. Then she looked down at Peter, piteously limp and still in her arms, and she drew a quick breath and made up her mind. She knew that at this shallow place the water could not be more than up to her waist, even at the flood-tide. But it was running like a mill-race.

She put her lips down to Peter's fuzzy little face, and held them there for a moment, and kissed him.

"We'll make it, Peter," she whispered. "We ain't afraid, are we, baby? We'll make it – sure – sure – we'll make it – "

She set out bravely, and the current swished about her ankles, to her knees, to her hips. And then, suddenly, unseen hands under the water seemed to rouse themselves, and she felt them pulling and tugging at her as the water deepened to her waist. In another moment she was fighting, fighting to hold her feet, struggling to keep the forces from driving her downstream. And then came the supreme moment, close to the shore for which she was striving. She felt herself giving away, and she cried out brokenly for Peter not to be afraid. And then something drove pitilessly against her body, and she flung out one arm, holding Peter close with the other – and caught hold of a bit of stub that protruded like a handle from the black and slippery log the flood-water had brought down upon her.

"We're all right, Peter," she cried, even in that moment when she knew she had lost. "We're all ri – "

And then suddenly the bright glory of her head went down, and with her went Peter, still held to her breast under the sweeping rush of the flood.

Even then it was thought of Peter that filled her brain. Somehow she was not afraid. She was not terrified, as she had often been of the flood-rush of waters that smashed down the creeks in springtime. An inundating roar was over her, under her, and all about her; it beat in a hissing thunder against the drums of her ears, yet it did not frighten her as she had sometimes been frightened. Even

in that black chaos which was swiftly suffocating the life from her, unspoken words of cheer for Peter formed in her heart, and she struggled to hold him to her, while with her other hand she fought to raise herself by the stub of the log to which she clung. For she was not thinking of him as Peter, the dog, but as something greater – something that had fought for her that day, and because of her had died.

Suddenly she felt a force pulling her from above. It was the big log, turning again to that point of equilibrium which for a space her weight had destroyed. In the edge of a quieter pool where the water swirled but did not rush, her brown head appeared, and then her white face, and with a last mighty effort she thrust up Peter so that his dripping body was on the log. Sobbingly she filled her lungs with air. But the drench of water and her hair blinded her so that she could not see. And she found all at once that the strength had gone from her body. Vainly she tried to drag herself up beside Peter, and in the struggle she raised herself a little, so that a low-hanging branch of a tree swept her like a mighty arm from the log.

With a cry she reached out for Peter. But he was gone, the log was gone, and she felt a vicious pulling at her hair, as Jed Hawkins himself had often pulled it, and for a few moments the current pounded against her body and the tree-limb swayed back and forth as it held her there by her hair.

If there was pain from that tugging, Nada did not feel it. She could see now, and thirty yards below her was a wide, quiet pool into which the log was drifting. Peter was gone. And then, suddenly, her heart seemed to stop its beating, and her eyes widened, and in that moment of astounding miracle she forgot that she was hanging by her hair in the ugly lip of the flood, with slippery hands beating and pulling at her from below. For she saw Peter – Peter in the edge of the pool – making his way toward the shore! For a space she could not believe. It must be his dead body drifting. It could not be Peter – swimming! And yet – his head was above the water – he was moving shoreward – he was struggling —

Frantically she tore at the detaining clutch above her. Something gave way. She felt the sharp sting of it, and then she plunged into the current, and swept down with it, and in the edge of the pool struck out with all her last strength until her feet touched bottom, and she could stand. She wiped the water from her eyes, sobbing in her breathless fear – her mighty hope. Peter had reached the shore. He had dragged himself out, and had crumpled down in a broken heap – but he was facing her, his bright eyes wide open and questing for her. Slowly Nada went to him. Until now, when it was all over, she had not realized how helplessly weak she was. Something was turning round and round in her head, and she was so dizzy that the shore swam before her eyes, and it seemed quite right to her that Peter should be alive – and not dead. She was still in a foot of water when she fell on her knees and dragged herself the rest of the way to him, and gathered him in her arms again, close up against her wet, choking breast.

And there the sun shone down upon them, without the shade of a twig overhead; and the water that a little while before had sung of death rippled with its old musical joy, and about them the birds sang, and very near to them a pair of mating red-squirrels chattered and played in a mountain-ash tree. And Nada's hair brightened in the sun, and began to ripple into curls at the end, and Peter's bristling whiskers grew dry – so that half an hour after she had dragged herself out of the water there was a new light in the girl's eyes, and a color in her cheeks that was like the first dawning of summer pink in the heart of a rose.

"We're a'most dry enough to go to Mister Jolly Roger, Peter," she whispered, a little thrill in her voice.

She stood up, and shook out her half dry hair, and then picked up Peter – and winced when he gave a little moan.

"He'll fix you, Peter," she comforted. "An' it'll be so nice over here – with him."

Her eyes were looking ahead, down through the glory of the sun-filled forest, and the song of birds and the beauty of the world filled her soul, and a new and wonderful freedom seemed to thrill in the touch of the soft earth under her feet.

"Flowers," she cried softly. "Flowers, an' birds, an' the sun, Peter – " She paused a moment, as if listening to the throb of light and life about her. And then, "I guess we'll go to Mister Jolly Roger now," she said.

She shook her hair again, so that it shone in a soft and rebellious glory about her, and the violet light grew a little darker in her eyes, and the color a bit deeper in her cheeks as she walked on into the forest over the faintly worn foot-trail that led to the old cabin where Jolly Roger was keeping himself away from the eyes of men.

CHAPTER III

From the little old cabin of dead Indian Tom, built in a grassy glade close to the shore of Sucker Creek, came the sound of a man's laughter. In this late afternoon the last flooding gold of the sun filled the open door of the poplar shack. The man's laughter, like the sun on the mottled tapestry of the poplar-wood, was a heart-lightening thing there on the edge of the great swamp that swept back for miles to the north and west. It was the sort of laughter one seldom hears from a man, not riotous of over-bold, but a big, clean laughter that came from the soul out. It was an infectious thing. It drove the gloom out of the blackest night. It dispelled fear, and if ever there were devils lurking in the edge of old Indian Tom's swamp they slunk away at the sound of it. And more than once, as those who lived in tepee and cabin and far-away shack could testify, that laugh had driven back death itself.

In the shack, this last day of May afternoon, stood leaning over a rough table the man of the laugh – Roger McKay, known as Jolly Roger, outlaw extraordinary, and sought by the men of every Royal Northwest Mounted Police patrol north of the Height of Land.

It was incongruous and inconceivable to think of him as an outlaw, as he stood there in the last glow of the sun – an outlaw with the weirdest and strangest record in all the northland hung up against his name. He was not tall, and neither was he short, and he was as plump as an apple and as rosy as its ripest side. There was something cherubic in the smoothness and the fullness of his face, the clear gray of his eyes, the fine-spun blond of his short-cropped hair, and the plumpness of his hands and half-bared arms. He was a priestly, well-fed looking man, was this Jolly Roger, rotund and convivial in all his proportions, and some in great error would have called him fat. But it was a strange kind of fatness, as many a man on the trail could swear to. And as for sin, or one sign of outlawry, it could not be found in any mark upon him – unless one closed his eyes to all else and guessed it by the belt and revolver holster which he wore about his rotund waist. In every other respect Jolly Roger appeared to be not only a harmless creature, but one especially designed by the Creator of things to spread cheer and good-will wherever he went. His age, if he had seen fit to disclose it, was thirty-four.

There seemed, at first, to be nothing that even a contented man might laugh at in the cabin, and even less to bring merriment from one on whose head a price was set – unless it was the delicious aroma of a supper just about ready to be served. On a little stove in the farthest corner of the shack the breasts of two spruce partridges were turning golden brown in a skittle, and from the broken neck of a coffee pot a rich perfume was rising with the steam. Piping hot in the open oven half a dozen baked potatoes were waiting in their crisp brown jackets.

From the table Jolly Roger turned, rubbing his hands and chuckling as he went for a third time to a low shelf built against the cabin wall. There he carefully raised a mass of old papers from a box, and at the movement there came a protesting squeak, and a little brown mouse popped up to the edge of it and peered at him with a pair of bright little questioning eyes.

"You little devil!" he exulted. "You nervy little devil!"

He raised the papers higher, and again looked upon his discovery of half an hour ago. In a soft nest lay four tiny mice, still naked and blind, and as he lowered the mass of papers the mother burrowed back to them, and he could hear her squeaking and chirruping to the little ones, as if she was trying to tell them not to be afraid of this man, for she knew him very well, and it wasn't in his mind to hurt them. And Jolly Roger, as he returned to the setting of his table, laughed again – and the laugh rolled out into the golden sunset, and from the top of a spruce at the edge of the creek a big blue-jay answered it in a riotous challenge.

But at the bottom of that laugh, if one could have looked a bit deeper, was something more than the naked little mice in the nest of torn-up paper. Today happiness had strangely come this gay-hearted freebooter's way, and he might have reached out, and seized it, and have kept it for his own. But in the hour of his opportunity he had refused it – because he was an outlaw – because strong

within him was a peculiar code of honor all his own. There was nothing of man-made religion in the soul of Roger McKay. Nature was his god; its manifestations, its life, and the air it gave him to breathe were the pages which made up the Book that guided him. And within the last hour, since the sun had begun to drop behind the tips of the tallest trees, these things had told him that he was a fool for turning away from the one great thing in all life – simply because his own humors of existence had made him an outcast and hunted by the laws of men. So the change had come, and for a space his soul was filled with the thrill of song and laughter.

Half an hour ago he believed that he had definitely made up his mind. He had forced himself into forgetfulness of laws he had broken, and the scarlet-coated men who were ever on the watch for his trail. They would never seek him here, in the wilderness country close to the edge of civilization, and time, he had told himself in that moment of optimism, would blot out both his identity and his danger. Tomorrow he would go over to Cragg's Ridge again, and then —

His mind was crowded with a vision of blue eyes, of brown curls glowing in the pale sun, of a wistful, wide-eyed little face turned up to him, and red lips that said falteringly, "I don't think it's wrong for you to kiss me – if you want to, Mister Jolly Roger!"

Boldly he had talked about it to the bright-eyed little mother-mouse who peered at him now and then over the edge of her box.

"You're a little devil of iniquity yourself," he told her. "You're a regular Mrs. Captain Kidd, and you've eaten my cheese, and chewed my snowshoe laces, and robbed me of a sock to make your nest. I ought to catch you in a trap, or blow your head off. But I don't. I let you live – and have a fam'ly. And it's you who have given me the Big Idea, Mrs. Captain Kidd. You sure have! You've told me I've got a right to have a nest of my own, and I'm going to have it – an' in that nest is going to be the sweetest, prettiest little angel that God Almighty ever forgot to make into a flower! Yessir. And if the law comes – "

And then, suddenly, the vision clouded, and there came into Jolly Roger's face the look of a man who knew – when he stood the truth out naked – that he was facing a world with his back to the wall.

And now, as the sun went down, and his supper waited – that cloud which came to blot out his picture grew deeper and more sinister, and the chill of it entered his heart. He turned from his table to the open door, and his fingers drew themselves slowly into clenched fists, and he looked out quietly and steadily into his world. The darkening depths of the forest reached out before his eyes, mottled and painted in the fading glory of the sun. It was his world, his everything – father, mother, God. In it he was born, and in it he knew that some day he would die. He loved it, understood it, and night and day, in sunshine and storm, its mighty spirit was the spirit that kept him company. But it held no message for him now. And his ears scarcely heard the raucous scolding of the blue-jay in the fire-tipped crest of the tall black spruce.

And then that something which was bigger than desire came up within him, and forced itself in words between his grimly set lips.

"She's only a – a kid," he said, a fierce, low note of defiance in his voice. "And I – I'm a damned pirate, and there's jails waiting for me, and they'll get me sooner or later, sure as God lets me live!"

He turned from the sun to his shadowing cabin, and for a moment a ghost of a smile played in his face as he heard the little mother-mouse rustling among her papers.

"We can't do it," he said. "We simply can't do it, Mrs. Captain Kidd. She's had hell enough without me taking her into another. And it'd be that, sooner or later. It sure would, Mrs. Captain Kidd. But I'm glad, mighty glad, to think she'd let me kiss her – if I wanted to. Think of that, Mrs. Captain Kidd! – if I wanted to. Oh, Lord!"

And the humor of it crept in alongside the tragedy in Jolly Roger's heart, and he chuckled as he bent over his partridge breasts.

"If I wanted to," he repeated. "Why, if I had a life to give, I'd give it – to kiss her just once! But, as it happens, Mrs. Captain Kidd – "

Jolly Roger's breath cut itself suddenly short, and for an instant he grew tense as he bent over the stove. His philosophy had taught him one thing above all others, that he was a survival of the fittest – only so long as he survived. And he was always guarding against the end. His brain was keen, his ears quick, and every fibre in him trained to its duty of watchfulness. And he knew, without turning his head, that someone was standing in the doorway behind him. There had come a faint noise, a shadowing of the fading sun-glow on the wall, the electrical disturbance of another presence, gazing at him quietly, without motion, and without sound. After that first telegraphic shock of warning he stabbed his fork into a partridge breast, flopped it over, chuckled loudly – and then with a lightning movement was facing the door, his forty-four Colt leveled waist-high at the intruder.

Almost in the same movement his gun-arm dropped limply to his side.

"Well, I'll be – "

He stared. And the face in the doorway stared back at him.

"Nada!" he gasped. "Good Lord, I thought – I thought – " He swallowed as he tried to lie. "I thought – it might be a bear!"

He did not, at first, see that the slim, calico-dressed little figure of Jed Hawkins' foster-girl was almost dripping wet. Her blue eyes were shining at him, wide and startled. Her cheeks were flushed. A strange look had frozen on her parted red lips, and her hair was falling loose in a cloud of curling brown tresses about her shoulders. Jolly Roger, dreaming of her in his insane happiness of a few minutes ago, sensed nothing beyond the beauty and the unexpectedness of her in this first moment. Then – swiftly – he saw the other thing. The last glow of the sun glistened in her wet hair, her dress was sodden and clinging, and little pools of water were widening slowly about her ragged shoes. These things he might have expected, for she had to cross the creek. But it was the look in her eyes that startled him, as she stood there with Peter, the mongrel pup, clasped tightly in her arms.

"Nada, what's happened?" he asked, laying his gun on the table. "You fell in the creek – "

"It – it's Peter," she cried, with a sobbing break in her voice. "We come on Jed Hawkins when he was diggin' up some of his whiskey, and he was mad, and pulled my hair, and Peter bit him – and then he picked up Peter and threw him against a rock – and he's terribly hurt! Oh, Mister Jolly Roger – "

She held out the pup to him, and Peter whimpered as Jolly Roger took his wiry little face between his hands, and then lifted him gently. The girl was sobbing, with passionate little catches in her breath, but there were no tears in her eyes as they turned for an instant from Peter to the gun on the table.

"If I'd had that," she cried, "I'd hev killed him!"

Jolly Roger's face was coldly gray as he knelt down on the floor and bent over Peter.

"He – pulled your hair, you say?"

"I – forgot," she whispered, close at his shoulder. "I wasn't goin' to tell you that. But it didn't hurt. It was Peter – "

He felt the damp caress of her curls upon his neck as she bent over him.

"Please tell me, Mister Jolly Roger – is he hurt – bad?"

With the tenderness of a woman Jolly Roger worked his fingers over Peter's scrawny little body. And Peter, whimpering softly, felt the infinite consolation of their touch. He was no longer afraid of Jed Hawkins, or of pain, or of death. The soul of a dog is simple in its measurement of blessings, and to Peter it was a great happiness to lie here, broken and in pain, with the face of his beloved mistress over him and Jolly Roger's hands working to mend his hurt. He whimpered when Jolly Roger found the broken place, and he cried out like a little child when there came the sudden quick snapping of a bone – but even then he turned his head so that he could thrust out his hot tongue against the back of his man-friend's hand. And Jolly Roger, as he worked, was giving instructions to the girl, who was quick as a bird to bring him cloth which she tore into bandages, so that at the end of ten minutes Peter's right hind leg was trussed up so tightly that it was as stiff and as useless as a piece of wood.

"His hip was dislocated and his leg-bone broken," said Jolly Roger when he had finished. "He is all right now, and inside of three weeks will be on his feet again."

He lifted Peter gently, and made him a nest among the blankets in his bunk. And then, still with that strange, gray look in his face, he turned to Nada.

She was standing partly facing the door, her eyes straight on him. And Jolly Roger saw in them that wonderful something which had given his storm-beaten soul a glimpse of paradise earlier that day. They were blue, so blue that he had never seen violets like them – and he knew that in her heart there was no guile behind which she could hide the secret they were betraying. A yearning such as had never before come into his life urged him to open his arms to her, and he knew that she would have come into them; but a still mightier will held them tense and throbbing at his side. Her cheeks were aflame as she looked at him, and he told himself that God could not have made a lovelier thing, as she stood there in her worn dress and her ragged shoes, with that light of glory in her face, and her damp hair waving and curling about her in the last light of the day.

"I knew you'd fix him, Mister-Roger," she whispered, a great pride and faith and worship in the low thrill of her voice. "I knew it!"

Something choked Jolly Roger, and he turned to the stove and began spearing the crisp brown potatoes on the end of a fork. And he said, with his back toward her,

"You came just in time for supper, Nada. We'll eat – and then I'll go home with you, as far as the Ridge."

Peter watched them. His pain was gone, and it was nice and comfortable in Jolly Roger's blanket, and with his whiskered face on his fore-paws his bright eyes followed every movement of these two who so completely made up his world. He heard that sweet little laugh which came only now and then from Nada's lips, when for a moment she was happy; he saw her shake out her hair in the glow of the lamp which Jolly Roger lighted, and he observed Jolly Roger standing at the stove – looking at her as she did it – a worship in his face which changed the instant her eyes turned toward him. In Peter's active little brain this gave birth to nothing of definite understanding, except that in it all he sensed happiness, for – somehow – there was always that feeling when they were with Jolly Roger, no matter whether the sun was shining or the day was dark and filled with gloom. Many times in his short life he had seen grief and tears in Nada's face, and had seen her cringe and hide herself at the vile cursing and witch-like voice of the man and woman back in the other cabin. But there was nothing like that in Jolly Roger's company. He had two eyes, and he was not always cursing, and he did not pull Nada's hair – and Peter loved him from the bottom of his soul. And he knew that his mistress loved him, for she had told him so, and there was always a different look in her eyes when she was with Jolly Roger, and it was only then that she laughed in that glad little way – as she was laughing now.

Jolly Roger was seated at the table, and Nada stood behind him, her face flushed joyously at the wonderful privilege of pouring his coffee. And then she sat down, and Jolly Roger gave her the nicest of the partridge breasts, and tried hard to keep his eyes calm and quiet as he looked at the adorable sweetness of her across the table from him. To Nada there was nothing of shame in what lay behind the happiness in the violet radiance of her eyes. Jolly Roger had brought to her the only happiness that had ever come into her life. Next to her God, which Jed Hawkins and his witch-woman had not destroyed within her, she thought of this stranger who for three months had been hiding in Indian Tom's cabin. And, like Peter, she loved him. The innocence of it lay naked in her eyes.

"Nada," said Jolly Roger. "You're seventeen –"

"Goin' on eighteen," she corrected quickly. "I was seventeen two weeks ago!"

The quick, undefined little note of eagerness in her voice made his heart thump. He nodded, and smiled.

"Yes, going on eighteen," he said. "And pretty soon some young fellow will come along, and see you, and marry you –"

"O-o-o-h-h-h!"

It was a little, strange cry that came to her lips, and Jolly Roger saw a quick throbbing in her bare throat, and her eyes were so wide-open and startled as she looked at him that he felt, for a moment, as if the resolution in his soul was giving way.

"Where are you goin', Mister Roger?"

"Me? Oh, I'm not going anywhere – not for a time, at least. But you – you'll surely be going away with some one – some day."

"I won't," she denied hotly. "I hate men! I hate all but you, Mister Jolly Roger. And if you go away –"

"Yes, if I go away —

"I'll kill Jed Hawkins!"

Involuntarily she reached out a slim hand to the big gun on the corner of the table.

"I'll kill 'im, if you go away," she threatened again, "He's broken his wife, and crippled her, and if it wasn't for her I'd have gone long ago. But I've promised, and I'm goin' to stay – until something happens. And if you go – now –"

At the choking throb in her throat and the sudden quiver that came to her lips, Jolly Roger jumped up for the coffee pot, though his cup was still half full.

"I won't go, Nada," he cried, trying to laugh. "I promise – cross my heart and hope to die! I won't go – until you tell me I can."

And then, feeling that something had almost gone wrong for a moment, Peter yipped from his nest in the bunk, and the gladness in Nada's eyes thanked Jolly Roger for his promise when he came back with the coffee pot. Standing behind her, he made pretense of refilling her cup, though she had scarcely touched it, and all the time his eyes were looking at her beautiful head, and he saw again the dampness in her hair.

"What happened in the creek, Nada?" he asked.

She told him, and at the mention of his name Peter drew his bristling little head erect, and waited expectantly. He could see Jolly Roger's face, now staring and a bit shocked, and then with a quick smile flashing over it; and when Nada had finished, Jolly Roger leaned a little toward her in the lampglow, and said,

"You've got to promise me something, Nada. If Jed Hawkins ever hits you again, or pulls your hair, or even threatens to do it – will you tell me?" Nada hesitated.

"If you don't – I'll take back my promise, and won't stay," he added.

"Then – I'll promise," she said. "If he does it, I'll tell you. But I ain't – I mean I am not afraid, except for Peter. Jed Hawkins will sure kill him if I take him back, Mister Roger. Will you keep him here? And – o-o-o-h! – if I could only stay, too –"

The words came from her in a frightened breath, and in an instant a flood of color rushed like fire into her cheeks. But Jolly Roger turned again to the stove, and made as if he had not seen the blush or heard her last words, so that the shame of her embarrassment was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Yes, I'll keep Peter," he said over his shoulder. And in his heart another voice which she could not hear, was crying, "And I'd give my life if I could keep you!"

Devouring his bits of partridge breast, Peter watched Jolly Roger and Nada out of the corner of his eye as they left the cabin half an hour later. It was dark when they went, and Jolly Roger closed only the mosquito-screen, leaving the door wide open, and Peter could hear their footsteps disappearing slowly into the deep gloom of the forest. It was a little before moonrise, and under the spruce and cedar and thick balsam the world was like a black pit. It was very still, and except for the soft tread of their own feet and the musical ripple of water in the creek there was scarcely a sound in this first hour of the night. In Jolly Roger there rose something of exultation, for Nada's warm little hand lay in his as he guided her through the darkness, and her fingers had clasped themselves tightly round his thumb. She was very close to him when he paused to make sure of the unseen trail, so close

that her cheek rested against his arm, and – bending a little – his lips touched the soft ripples of her hair. But he could not see her in the gloom, and his heart pounded fiercely all the way to the ford.

Then he laughed a strange little laugh that was not at all like Jolly Roger.

"I'll try and not let you get wet again, Nada," he said.

Her fingers still held to his thumb, as if she was afraid of losing him there in the blackness that lay about them like a great ink-blotch. And she crept closer to him, saying nothing, and all the power in his soul fought in Jolly Roger to keep him from putting his arms about her slim little body and crying out the worship that was in him.

"I ain't – I mean I'm not afraid of gettin' wet," he heard her whisper then. "You're so big and strong, Mister Roger – "

Gently he freed his thumb from her fingers, and picked her up, and held her high, so that she was against his breast and above the deepest of the water. Lightly at first Nada's arms lay about his shoulders, but as the flood began to rush higher and she felt him straining against it, – her arms tightened, until the clasp of them was warm and thrilling round Jolly Roger's neck. She gave a big gasp of relief when he stood her safely down upon her feet on the other side. And then again she reached out, and found his hand, and twined her fingers about his big thumb – and Jolly Roger went on with her over the plain toward Cragg's Ridge, dripping wet, just as the rim of the moon began to rise over the edge of the eastern forests.

CHAPTER IV

It seemed an interminable wait to Peter, back in the cabin. Jolly Roger had put out the light, and when the moon came up the glow of it did not come into the dark room where Peter lay, for the open door was to the west, and curtains were drawn closely at both windows. But through the door he could see the first mellowing of the night, and after that the swift coming of a soft, golden radiance which swallowed all darkness and filled his world with the ghostly shadows which seemed alive, yet never made a sound. It was a big, splendid moon this night, and Peter loved the moon, though he had seen it only a few times in his three months of life. It fascinated him more than the sun, for it was always light when the sun came, and he had never seen the sun eat up darkness, as the moon did. Its mystery awed him, but did not frighten. He could not quite understand the strange, still shadows which were always unreal when he nosed into them, and it puzzled him why the birds did not fly about in the moon glow, and sing as they did in the day-time. And something deep in him, many generations older than himself, made his blood run faster when this thing that ate up darkness came creeping through the sky, and he was filled with a yearning to adventure out into the strange glow of it, quietly and stealthily, watching and listening for things he had never seen or heard.

In the gloom of the cabin his eyes remained fixed steadily upon the open door, and for a long time he listened only for the returning footsteps of Jolly Roger and Nada. Twice he made efforts to drag himself to the edge of the bunk, but the movement sent such a cutting pain through him that he did not make a third. And outside, after a time, he heard the Night People rousing themselves. They were very cautious, these Night People, for unlike the creatures of the dawn, waking to greet the sun with song and happiness, most of them were sharp-fanged and long-clawed-rovers and pirates of the great wilderness, ready to kill. And this, too, Peter sensed through the generations of northland dog that was in him. He heard a wolf howl, coming faintly through the night from miles away, and something told him it was not a dog. From nearer came the call of a moose, and that same sense told him he had heard a monster bear which his eyes had never seen. He did not know of the soft-footed, night-eyed creatures of prey – the fox, the lynx, the fisher-cat, the mink and the ermine, nor of the round-eyed, feathered murderers in the tree-tops – yet that same something told him they were out there among the shadows, under the luring glow of the moon. And a thing happened, all at once, to stab the truth home to him. A baby snowshoe rabbit, a third grown, hopped out into the open close to the cabin door, and as it nibbled at the green grass, a gray catapult of claw and feathers shot out of the air, and Peter heard the crying agony of the rabbit as the owl bore it off into the thick spruce tops. Even then – unafraid – Peter wanted to go out into the moon glow!

At last, there was an end to his wait. He heard footsteps, and Jolly Roger came from out of the yellow moon-mist of the night and stopped in front of the door. There he stood, making no sound, and looking into the west, where the sky was ablaze with stars over the tree-tops. There was a glad little yip in Peter's throat, but he choked it back. Jolly Roger was strangely quiet, and Peter could not hear Nada, and as he sniffed, and gulped the lump in his throat, he seemed to catch the breath of something impending in the air. Then Jolly Roger came in, and sat down in darkness near the table, and for a long time Peter kept his eyes fixed on the shadowy blotch of him there in the gloom, and listened to his breathing, until he could stand it no longer, and whined.

The sound stirred Jolly Roger. He got up, struck a match – and then blew the match out, and came and sat down beside Peter, and stroked him with his hand.

"Peter," he said in a low voice, "I guess we've got a job on our hands. You began it today – and I've got to finish it. We're goin' to kill Jed Hawkins!"

Peter snuggled closer.

"Mebby I'm bad, and mebbly the law ought to have me," Jolly Roger went on in the darkness, "but until tonight I never made up my mind to kill a man. I'm ready – now. If Jed Hawkins hurts her again we're goin' to kill him! Understand, *Pied-Bot*?"

He got up, and Peter could hear him undressing. Then he made a nest for Peter on the floor, and stretched himself out in the bunk; and after that, for a long time, there seemed to be something heavier than the gloom of night in the cabin for Peter, and he listened and waited and prayed in his dog way for Nada's return, and wondered why it was that she left him so long. And the Night People held high carnival under the yellow moon, and there was flight and terror and slaughter in the glow of it – and Jolly Roger slept, and the wolf howled nearer, and the creek chortled its incessant song of running water, and in the end Peter's eyes closed, and a red-eyed ermine peeped over the sill into the man-and dog-scented stillness of the outlaw's cabin.

For many days after this first night in the cabin, Peter did not see Nada. There was more rain, and the creek flooded higher, so that each time Jolly Roger went over to Cragg's Ridge he took his life in his hands in fording the stream. Peter saw no one but Jolly Roger, and at the end of the second week he was going about on his mended leg. But there would always be a limp in his gait, and always his right hind-foot would leave a peculiar mark in the trail.

These two weeks of helplessness were an education in Peter's life and were destined to leave their mark upon him always. He learned to know Jolly Roger, not alone from seeing events, but through an intuitive instinct that grew swiftly somewhere in his shrewd head. This instinct, given widest scope in these weeks of helplessness, developed faster than any other in him, until in the end, he could judge Jolly Roger's humor by the sound of his approaching footsteps. Never was there a waking hour in which he was not fighting to comprehend the mystery of the change that had come over his life. He knew that Nada was gone, and each day that passed put her farther away from him, yet he also sensed the fact that Jolly Roger went to her, and when the outlaw returned to the cabin Peter was filled with a yearning hope that Nada was returning with him.

But gradually Peter came to think less about Nada, and more about Jolly Roger, until at last his heart beat with a love for this man which was greater than all other things in his world. And in these days Jolly Roger found in Peter's comradeship and growing understanding a comforting outlet for the things which at times consumed him. Peter saw it all – hours when Jolly Roger's voice and laughter filled the cabin with cheer and happiness, and others when his face was set in grim lines, with that hard, far-away look in his eyes that Peter could never quite make out. It was at such times, when Jolly Roger held a choking grip on the love in his heart, that he told Peter things which he had never revealed to a human soul.

In the dusk of one evening, as he sat wet with the fording of the creek, he said to Peter,

"We ought to go, Peter. We ought to pack up – and go tonight. Because – sometimes I'm afraid of myself, *Pied-Bot*. I'd kill for her. I'd die for her. I'd give up the whole world, and live in a prison cell – if I could have her with me. And that's dangerous, Peter, because we can't have her. It's impossible, boy. She doesn't guess why I'm here. She doesn't know I've been outlawin' it for years, and that I'm hiding here because the Police would never think of looking for Jolly Roger McKay this close to civilization. If I told her, she would think I was worse than Jed Hawkins, and she wouldn't believe me if I told her I've outlawed with my wits instead of a gun, and that I've never criminally hurt a person in my life. No, she wouldn't believe that, Peter. And she – she cares for me, *Pied-Bot*. That's the hell of it! And she's got faith in me, and would go with me to the Missioner's tomorrow. I know it. I can see it, feel it, and I – "

His fingers tightened in the loose hide of Peter's neck.

"Peter," he whispered in the thickening darkness. "I believe there's a God, but He's a different sort of God than most people believe in. He lives in the trees out there, in the flowers, in the birds, the sky, in everything – and I hope that God will strike me dead if I do what isn't right with her, Peter! I do. I hope he strikes me dead!"

And that night Peter knew that Jolly Roger tossed about restlessly in his bunk, and slept but little.

But the next morning he was singing, and the warm sun flooding over the wilderness was not more cheerful than his voice as he cooked their breakfast. That, to Peter, was the most puzzling thing about this man. With gloom and oppression fastened upon him he would rise up suddenly, and start whistling or singing, and once he said to Peter,

"I take my cue from the sun, Peter Clubfoot. It's always shining, no matter if the clouds are so thick underneath that we can't see it. A laugh never hurts a man, unless he's got a frozen lung."

Jolly Roger did not cross the ford that day.

CHAPTER V

It was in the third week after his hurt that Peter saw Nada. By that time he could easily follow Jolly Roger as far as the fording-place, and there he would wait, sometimes hours at a stretch, while his comrade and master went over to Cragg's Ridge. But frequently Jolly Roger would not cross, but remained with Peter, and would lie on his back at the edge of a grassy knoll they had found, reading one of the little old-fashioned red books which Peter knew were very precious to him. Often he wondered what was between the faded red covers that was so interesting, and if he could have read he would have seen such titles as "Margaret of Anjou," "History of Napoleon," "History of Peter the Great," "Caesar," "Columbus the Discoverer," and so on through the twenty volumes which Jolly Roger had taken from a wilderness mail two years before, and which he now prized next to his life.

This afternoon, as they lay in the sleepy quiet of June, Jolly Roger answered the questioning inquisitiveness in Peter's face and eyes.

"You see, *Pied-Bot*, it was this way," he said, beginning a little apologetically. "I was dying for something to read, and I figgered there'd be something on the Mail – newspapers, you know. So I stopped it, and tied up the driver, and found these. And I swear I didn't take anything else – that time. There's twenty of them, and they weigh nine pounds, and in the last two years I've toted them five thousand miles. I wouldn't trade them for my weight in gold, and I'm pretty heavy. I named you after one of them – Peter. I pretty near called you Christopher Columbus. And some day we've got to take these books to the man they were going to, Peter. I've promised myself that. It seems sort of like stealing the soul out of someone. I just borrowed them, that's all. And I've kept the address of the owner, away up on the edge of the Barrens. Some day we're going to make a special trip to take the books home."

Peter, all at once, had become interested in something else, and following the direction of his pointed nose Jolly Roger saw Nada standing quietly on the opposite side of the stream, looking at them. In a moment Peter knew her, and he was trembling in every muscle when Jolly Roger caught him up under his arm, and with a happy laugh plunged through the creek with him. For a good five minutes after that Jolly Roger stood aside watching Peter and Nada, and there was a glisten of dampness in his eyes when he saw the wet on Nada's cheeks, and the whimpering joy of Peter as he caressed her face and hands. Three weeks had been a long time to Peter, but he could see no difference in the little mistress he worshipped. There were still the radiant curls to hide his nose in, the gentle hands, the sweet voice, the warm thrill of her body as she hugged him in her arms. He did not know that she had new shoes and a new dress, and that some of the color had gone from her red lips, and that her cheeks were paler, and that she could no longer hide the old haunted look in her eyes.

But Jolly Roger saw the look, and the growing pallor, and had noted them for two weeks past. And later that afternoon, when Nada returned to Cragg's Ridge, and he re-crossed the stream with Peter, there was a hard and terrible look in his eyes which Peter had caught there more and more frequently of late. And that evening, in the twilight of their cabin, Jolly Roger said,

"It's coming soon, Peter. I'm expecting it. Something is happening which she won't tell us about. She is afraid for me. I know it. But I'm going to find out – soon. And then, *Pied-Bot*, I think we'll probably kill Jed Hawkins, and hit for the North."

The gloom of foreboding that was in Jolly Roger's voice and words seemed to settle over the cabin for many days after that, and more than ever Peter sensed the thrill and warning of that mysterious something which was impending. He was developing swiftly, in flesh and bone and instinct, and there began to possess him now the beginning of that subtle caution and shrewdness which were to mean so much to him later on. An instinct greater than reason, if it was not reason itself, told him that his master was constantly watching for something which did not come. And that same instinct, or reason, impinged upon him the fact that it was a thing to be guarded against. He

did not go blindly into the mystery of things now. He circumvented them, and came up from behind. Craft and cunning replaced mere curiosity and puppyish egoism. He was quick to learn, and Jolly Roger's word became his law, so that only once or twice was he told a thing, and it became a part of his understanding. While the keen, shrewd brain of his Airedale father developed inside Peter's head, the flesh and blood development of his big, gentle, soft-footed Mackenzie hound mother kept pace in his body. His legs and feet began to lose their grotesqueness. Flesh began to cover the knots in his tail. His head, bristling fiercely with wiry whiskers, seemed to pause for a space to give his lanky body a chance to catch up with it. And in spite of his big feet, so clumsy that a few weeks ago they had stumbled over everything in his way, he could now travel without making a sound.

So it came to pass, after a time, that when Peter heard footsteps approaching the cabin he made no effort to reveal himself until he knew it was Jolly Roger who was coming. And this was strangely in spite of the fact that in the five weeks since Nada had brought him from Cragg's Ridge no one but Jolly Roger and Nada had set foot within sight of the shack. It was an inborn caution, growing stronger in him each day. There came one early evening when Peter made a discovery. He had returned with Jolly Roger from a fishing trip farther down the creek, and scarcely had he set nose to the little clearing about the cabin when he caught the presence of a strange scent. He investigated it swiftly, and found it all about the cabin, and very strong close up against the cabin door. There were no doubts in Peter's mind. A man had been there, and this man had gone around and around the cabin, and had opened the door, and had even gone inside, for Peter found the scent of him on the floor. He tried, in a way, to tell Jolly Roger. He bristled, and whined, and looked searchingly into the darkening edge of the forest. Jolly Roger quested with him for a few moments, and when he failed to find marks in the ground he began cleaning a fish for supper, and said.

"Probably a wolverine, *Pied-Bot*. The rascal came to see what he could find while we were away."

But Peter was not satisfied. He was restless all that night. Sounds which had been familiar now held a new significance for him. The next day he was filled with a quiet but brooding expectancy. He resented the intrusion of the strange footprints. It was, in his process of instinctive reasoning, an encroachment upon the property rights of his master, and he was – true to the law of his species – the guardian of those rights.

The fourth evening after the stranger's visit to the cabin Jolly Roger was later than usual in returning from Cragg's Ridge. Peter had been on a hunting adventure of his own, and came to the cabin at sunset. But he never came out of cover now without standing quietly for a few moments, getting the wind, and listening. And tonight, poking his head between some balsams twenty yards from the shack, he was treated to a sudden thrill. The cabin door was open. And standing close to this door, looking quietly and cautiously about, stood a stranger. He was not like Jed Hawkins, was Peter's first impression. He was tall, with a wide-brimmed hat, and wore boots with striped trousers tucked into them, and on his coat were bits of metal which caught the last gleams of the sun. Peter knew nothing of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police. But he sensed danger, and he remained very quiet, without moving a muscle of his head or body, while the stranger looked about, with a hand on his unbuttoned pistol holster. Not until he entered the cabin, and closed the door after him, did Peter move back into the deeper gloom of the forest. And then, silent as a fox, he skulked through cover to the foot-trail, and down the trail to the ford, across which Jolly Roger would come from Cragg's Ridge.

There was still half an hour of daylight when Jolly Roger arrived. Peter did not, as usual, run to the edge of the bank to meet him. He remained sitting stolidly on his haunches, with his ears flattened, and in his whole attitude no sign of gladness at his master's coming. With every instinct of caution developed to the highest degree within him, Jolly Roger was lightning quick to observe the significance of small things. He spoke to Peter, caressed him with his hand, and moved on along the

foot-trail toward the cabin. Peter fell in behind him moodily, and after a few moments stopped, and squatted on his haunches again. Jolly Roger was puzzled.

"What is it, Peter?" he asked. "Are you afraid of that wolverine – "

Peter whined softly; but even as he whined, his ears were flat, and his eyes filled with a red light as they glared down the trail beyond the outlaw. Jolly Roger turned and went on, until he disappeared around a twist in the path. There he stopped, and peered back. Peter was not following him, but still sat where he had left him. A quicker breath came to Jolly Roger's lips, and he went back to Peter. For fully a minute he stood beside him, watching and listening, and not once did the reddish glare in Peter's eyes leave the direction of the cabin. Jolly Roger's eyes had grown very bright, and suddenly he dropped on his knees beside Peter, and spoke softly, close up to his flattened ear.

"You say it isn't a wolverine, Peter? Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Peter's teeth clicked, and he whimpered, never taking his eyes from ahead.

There was a cold light in Jolly Roger's eyes as he rose to his feet, and he turned swiftly and quietly into the edge of the forest, and in the gloom that was gathering there his hand carried the big automatic. Peter followed him now, and Jolly Roger swung in a wide circle, so that they came up on that forest side of the cabin where there was no window. And here Jolly Roger knelt down beside Peter again, and whispered to him.

"You stay here, *Pied-Bot*. Understand? You stay here."

He pressed him down gently with his hand, so that Peter understood. Then, slinking low, and swift as a cat, Jolly Roger ran to the end of the cabin where there was no window. With his head close to the ground he peered out cautiously at the door. It was closed. Then he looked at the windows. To the west the curtains were up, as he had left them. And to the east —

A whimsical smile played at the corners of his mouth. Those curtains he had kept tightly drawn. One of them was down now. But the other was raised two inches, so that one hidden within the cabin could watch the approach from the trail!

He drew back, and under his breath he chuckled. He recognized the sheer nerve of the thing, the clever handiwork of it. Someone was inside the cabin, and he was ready to stake his life it was Cassidy, the Irish bloodhound of "M" Division. If anyone ferreted him out way down here on the edge of civilization he had gambled with himself that it would be Cassidy. And Cassidy had come — Cassidy, who had hung like a wolf to his trails for three years, who had chased him across the Barren Lands, who had followed him up the Mackenzie, and back again — who had fought with him, and starved with him, and froze with him, yet had never brought him to prison. Deep down in his heart Jolly Roger loved Cassidy. They had played, and were still playing, a thrilling game, and to win that game had become the life's ambition of each. And now Cassidy was in there, confident that at last he had his man, and waiting for him to step into the trap.

To Jolly Roger, in the face of its possible tragedy, there was a deep-seated humor in the situation. Three times in the last year and a half had he turned the tables on Cassidy, leaving him floundering in the cleverly woven webs which the man-hunter had placed for his victim. This was the fourth time. And Cassidy would be tremendously upset!

Praying that Peter would remain quiet, Jolly Roger took off his shoes. After that he made no more sound than a ferret as he crept to the door. An inch at a time he raised himself, until he was standing up, with his ear half an inch from the crack that ran lengthwise of the frame. Holding his breath, he listened. For an interminable time, it seemed to him, there was no sound from within. He guessed what Cassidy was doing — peering through that slit of window under the curtain. But he was not absolutely sure. And he knew the necessity of making no error, with Cassidy in there, gripping the butt of his gun.

Suddenly he heard a movement. A man's steps, subdued and yet distinct, were moving from the window toward the door. Half way they paused, and turned to one of the windows looking westward. But it was evident the watcher was not expecting his game from that direction, for after a moment's

silence he returned to the window through which he could see the trail. This time Jolly Roger was sure. Cassidy was again peering through the window, with his back toward him, and every muscle in the forest rover's body gathered for instant action. In another moment he had flung open the door, and the watcher at the window whirled about to find himself looking straight into the muzzle of Jolly Roger's gun.

For several minutes after that last swift movement of Jolly Roger's, Peter lay where his master had left him, his eyes fairly popping from his head in his eagerness to see what was happening. He heard voices, and then the wild thrill of Jolly Roger's laughter, and restraining himself no longer he trotted cautiously to the open door of the cabin. In a chair sat the stranger with the broad-brimmed hat and high boots, with his hands securely tied behind him. And Jolly Roger was hustling about, filling a shoulder-pack in the last light of the day.

"Cassidy, I oughta kill you," Jolly Roger was saying as he worked, an exultant chuckle in his voice. "You don't give me any peace. No matter where I go you're sure to come, and I can't remember that I ever invited you. I oughta put you out of the way, and plant flowers over you, now that I've got the chance. But I'm too chicken-hearted. Besides, I like you. By the time you get tired of chasing me you should be a pretty good man-hunter. But just now you lack finesse, Cassidy – you lack finesse." And Jolly Roger's chuckle broke into another laugh.

Cassidy heaved out a grunt.

"It's luck – just damned luck!" he growled.

"If it is, I hope it keeps up," said Jolly Roger. "Now, look here, Cassidy! Let's make a man's bet of it. If you don't get me next time – if you fail, and I turn the trick on you once more – will you quit?"

Cassidy's eyes gleamed in the thickening dusk.

"If I don't get you next time – I'll hand in my resignation!"

The laughter went out of Jolly Roger's voice.

"I believe you, Cassidy. You've played square – always. And now – if I free your hands – will you swear to give me a two hours' start before you leave this cabin?"

"I'll give you the start," said Cassidy.

His lean face was growing indistinct in the gloom.

Jolly Roger came up behind him. There was the slash of a knife. Then he picked up his shoulder-pack. At the door he paused.

"Look at your watch when I'm gone, Cassidy, and be sure you make it a full two hours."

"I'll make it two hours and five minutes," said Cassidy. "Hittin' north are you, Jolly Roger?"

"I'm hittin' – bushward," replied the outlaw. "I'm going where it's plenty thick and hard to travel, Cassidy. Goodby –"

He was gone. He hit straight north, making noise as he went, but once in the timber he swung southward, and plunged through the creek with Peter under his arm. Not until they had traveled a good half mile over the plain did Jolly Roger speak. Then he said, speaking directly at Peter,

"Cassidy thinks I'll sure hit for the North country again, *Pied-Bot*. But we're foolin' him. I've sort of planned on something like this happening, and right now we're hittin' for the tail-end of Cragg's Ridge where there's a mess of rock that the devil himself can hardly get into. We've got to do it, boy. We can't leave the girl – just now. We can't leave – her –"

Jolly Roger's voice choked. Then he paused for a moment, and bent over to put his hand on Peter.

"If it hadn't been for you, Peter – Cassidy would have got me – sure. And I'm wondering, Peter – I'm wondering – why did God forget to give a dog speech?"

Peter whined in answer, and through the darkness of the night they went on together.

CHAPTER VI

A frosty mist dulled the light of the stars, but this cleared away as Jolly Roger and Peter crossed the plain between the creek and Cragg's Ridge.

They did not hurry, for McKay had faith in Cassidy's word. He knew the red-headed man-hunter would not break his promise – he would wait the full two hours in Indian Tom's cabin, and another five minutes after that. In Jolly Roger, as the minutes passed, exultation at his achievement died away, and there filled him again the old loneliness – the loneliness which called out against the fate which had made of Cassidy an enemy instead of a friend. And yet – what an enemy!

He reached down, and touched Peter's bushy head with his hand.

"Why didn't the Law give another man the assignment to run us down," he protested. "Someone we could have hated, and who would have hated us! Why did they send Cassidy – the fairest and squarest man that ever wore red? We can't do him a dirty turn – we can't hurt him, *Pied-Bot*, even at the worst. And if ever he takes us in to Headquarters, and looks at us through the bars, I feel it's going to be like a knife in his heart. But he'll do it, Peter, if he can. It's his job. And he's honest. We've got to say that of Cassidy."

The Ridge loomed up at the edge of the level plain, and for a few moments Jolly Roger paused, while he looked off through the eastward gloom. A mile in that direction, beyond the cleft that ran like a great furrow through the Ridge, was Jed Hawkins' cabin, still and dark under the faint glow of the stars. And in that cabin was Nada. He felt that she was sitting at her little window, looking out into the night, thinking of him – and a great desire gripped at his heart, tugging him in its direction. But he turned toward the west.

"We can't let her know what has happened, boy," he said, feeling the urge of caution. "For a little while we must let her think we have left the country. If Cassidy sees her, and talks with her, something in those blue-flower eyes of hers might give us away if she knew we were hiding up among the rocks of the Stew-Kettle. But I'm hopin' God A'mighty won't let her see Cassidy. And I'm thinking He won't, *Pied-Bot*, because I've a pretty good hunch He wants us to settle with Jed Hawkins before we go."

It was a habit of his years of aloneness, this talking to a creature that could make no answer. But even in the darkness he sensed the understanding of Peter.

Rocks grew thicker and heavier under their feet, and they went more slowly, and occasionally stumbled in the gloom. But, after a fashion, they knew their way even in darkness. More than once Peter had wondered why his master had so carefully explored this useless mass of upheaved rock at the end of Cragg's Ridge. They had never seen an animal or a blade of grass in all its gray, sun-blasted sterility. It was like a hostile thing, overhung with a half-dead, slow-beating something that was like the dying pulse of an evil thing. And now darkness added to its mystery and its unfriendliness as Peter nosed close at his master's heels. Up and up they picked their way, over and between ragged upheavals of rock, twisting into this broken path and that, feeling their way, partly sensing it, and always ascending toward the stars. Roger McKay did not speak again to Peter. Each time he came out where the sky was clear he looked toward the solitary dark pinnacle, far up and ahead, strangely resembling a giant tombstone in the star-glow, that was their guide. And after many minutes of strange climbing, in which it seemed to Jolly Roger the nail-heads in the soles of his boots made weirdly loud noises on the rocks, they came near to the top.

There they stopped, and in a deeply shadowed place where there was a carpet of soft sand, with walls of rock close on either side, Jolly Roger spread out his blankets. Then he went out from the black shadow, so that a million stars seemed not far away over their heads. Here he sat down, and began to smoke, thinking of what tomorrow would hold for him, and of the many days destined to follow that tomorrow. Nowhere in the world was there to be – for him – the peace of an absolute

certainty. Not until he felt the cold steel of iron bars with his two hands, and the fatal game had been played to the end.

There was no corrosive bitterness of the vengeful in Jolly Roger's heart. For that reason even his enemies, the Police, had fallen into the habit of using the nickname which the wilderness people had given him. He did not hate these police. Curiously, he loved them. Their type was to him the living flesh and blood of the finest manhood since the Crusaders. And he did not hate the law. At times the Law, as personified in all of its unswerving majesty, amused him. It was so terribly serious over such trivial things – like himself, for instance. It could not seem to sleep or rest until a man was hanged, or snugly put behind hard steel, no matter how well that man loved his human-kind – and the world. And Jolly Roger loved both. In his heart he believed he had not committed a crime by achieving justice where otherwise there would have been no justice. Yet outwardly he cursed himself for a lawbreaker. And he loved life. He loved the stars silently glowing down at him tonight. He loved even the gray, lifeless rock, which recalled to his imaginative genius the terrific and interesting life that had once existed – he loved the ghostly majesty of the grave-like pinnacle that rose above him, and beyond that he loved all the world.

But most of all, more than his own life or all that a thousand lives might hold for him, he loved the violet-eyed girl who had come into his life from the desolation and unhappiness of Jed Hawkins' cabin.

Forgetting the law, forgetting all but her, he went at last into the dungeon-like gloom between the rocks, and after Peter had wallowed himself a bed in the carpet of sand they fell asleep.

They awoke with the dawn. But for three days thereafter they went forth only at night, and for three days did not show themselves above the barricade of rocks. The Stew-Kettle was what Jolly Roger had called it, and when the sun was straight above, or descending with the last half of the day, the name fitted.

It was a hot place, so hot that at a distance its piled-up masses of white rock seemed to simmer and broil in the blazing heat of the July sun. Neither man nor beast would look into the heart of it, Jolly Roger had assured Peter, unless the one was half-witted and the other a fool. Looking at it from the meadowy green plain that lay between the Ridge and the forest their temporary retreat was anything but a temptation to the eye. Something had happened there a few thousand centuries before, and in a moment of evident spleen and vexation the earth had vomited up that pile of rock debris, and Jolly Roger good humoredly told himself and Peter that it was an act of Providence especially intended for them, though planned and erupted some years before they were born.

The third afternoon of their hiding, Jolly Roger decided upon action.

This afternoon all of the caloric guns of an unclouded sun had seemed to concentrate themselves on the gigantic rock-pile. Though it was now almost sunset, a swirling and dizzying incandescence still hovered about it. The huge masses of stone were like baked things to the touch of hand and foot, and one breathed a smoldering air in between their gray and white walls.

Thus forbidding looked the Stew-Kettle, when viewed from the plain. But from the top-most crag of the mass, which rose a hundred feet high at the end of the Ridge, one might find his reward for a blistering climb. On all sides, a paradise of green and yellow and gold, stretched the vast wilderness, studded with shimmering lakes that gleamed here and there from out of their rich dark frames of spruce and cedar and balsam. And half way between the edge of the plain and this highest pinnacle of rock, utterly hidden from the eyes of both man and beast, nestled the hiding place which Jolly Roger and Peter had found.

It was a cool and cavernous spot, in spite of the Sahara-like heat of the great pile. In the very heart of it two gigantic masses of rock had put their shoulders together, like Gog and Magog, so that under their ten thousand tons of weight was a crypt-like tunnel as high as a man's head, into which the light and the glare of the sun never came.

Peter, now that he had grown accustomed to the deadness of it, liked this change from Indian Tom's cabin. He liked his wallow of soft sand during the day, and he liked still more the aloneness and the aloofness of their ramparted stronghold when the cool of evening came. He did not, of course, understand just what their escape from Cassidy had meant, but instinct was shrewdly at work within him, and no wolf could have guarded the place more carefully than he. And he had all creation in mind when he guarded the rock-pile.

All but Nada. Many times he whimpered for her, just as the great call for her was in Jolly Roger's own heart. And on this third afternoon, as the hot July sun dipped half way to the western forests, both Peter and his master were looking yearningly, and with the same thought, toward the east, where over the back-bone of Cragg's Ridge Jed Hawkins' cabin lay.

"We'll let her know tonight," Roger McKay said at last, with something very slow and deliberate in his voice. "We'll take the chance – and let her know."

Peter's bristling Airedale whiskers, standing out like a bunch of broom splints about his face, quivered sympathetically, and he thumped his tail in the sand. He was an artful hypocrite, was Peter, because he always looked as if he understood, whether he did or not. And Jolly Roger, staring at the gray rock-backs outside their tunnel door, went on.

"We must play square with her, *Pied-Bot*, and it's a crime worse than murder not to let her know the truth. If she wasn't a kid, Peter! But she's that – just a kid – the sweetest, purest thing God A'mighty ever made, and it isn't fair to live this lie any longer, no matter how we love her. And we do love her, Peter."

Peter lay very quiet, watching the strange gray look that had settled in Jolly Roger's face.

"I've got to tell her that I'm a damned highwayman," he added, in a moment. "And she won't understand, Peter. She can't. But I'm going to do it. I'm going to tell her – today. And then – I think we'll be hittin' north pretty soon, *Pied-Bot*. If it wasn't for Jed Hawkins – " He rose up out of the sand, his hands clenched.

"We ought to kill Jed Hawkins before we go. It would be safer for her," he finished.

He went out, forgetting Peter, and climbed a rock-splintered path until he stood on the knob of a mighty boulder, looking off into the northern wilderness. Off there, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand miles – was home. It was ALL his home, from Hudson's Bay to the Rockies, from the Height of Land to the Arctic plains, and in it he had lived the thrill of life according to his own peculiar code. He knew that he had loved life as few had ever loved it. He had worshipped the sun and the moon and the stars. The world had been a glorious place in which to live, in spite of its ceaseless peril for him.

But there was nothing of cheer left in his heart now as he stood in the blaze of the setting sun. Paradise had come to him for a little while, and because of it he had lived a lie. He had not told Jed Hawkins' foster-girl that he was an outlaw, and that he had come to the edge of civilization because he thought it was the last place the Royal Mounted would look for him. When he went to her this evening it would probably be for the last time. He would tell her the truth. He would tell her the police were after him from one end of the Canadian northland to the other. And that same night, with Peter, he would hit the trail for the Barren Lands, a thousand miles away. He was sure of himself now – sure – even as the dark wall of the forest across the plain faded out, and gave place to a pale, girlish face with eyes blue as flowers, and brown curls filled with the lustre of the sun – a face that had taken the place of mother, sister and God deep down in his soul. Yes, he was sure of himself – even with that face rising to give battle to his last great test of honor. He was an outlaw, and the police wanted him, but —

Peter was troubled by the grimness that settled in his master's face. They waited for dusk, and when deep shadows had gathered in the valley McKay led the way out of the rock-pile.

An hour later they came cautiously through the darkness that lay between the broken shoulders of Cragg's Ridge. There was a light in the cabin, but Nada's window was dark. Peter crouched down under the warning pressure of McKay's hand.

"I'll go on alone," he said. "You stay here."

It seemed a long time that he waited in the darkness. He could not hear the low *tap, tap, tap* of his master's fingers against the glass of Nada's darkened window. And Jolly Roger, in response to that signal-tapping, heard nothing from within, except a monotone of voice that came from the outer room. For half an hour he waited, repeating the signals at intervals. At last a door opened, and Nada stood silhouetted against the light of the room beyond.

McKay tapped again, very lightly, and the door closed quickly behind the girl. In a moment she was at the window, which was raised a little from the bottom.

"Mister – Roger – " she whispered. "Is it —*you*?"

"Yes," he said, finding a little hand in the darkness. "It's me."

The hand was cold, and its fingers clung tightly to his, as if the girl was frightened. Peter, restless with waiting, had come up quietly in the dark, and he heard the low, trembling whisper of Nada's voice at the window. There was something in the note of it, and in the caution of Jolly Roger's reply, that held him stiff and attentive, his ears wide-open for approaching sound. For several minutes he stood thus, and then the whispering voices at the window ceased and he heard his master retreating very quietly through the night. When Jolly Roger spoke to him, back under the broken shoulder of the ridge, he did not know that Peter had stood near the window.

McKay stood looking back at the pale glow of light in the cabin.

"Something happened there tonight – something she wouldn't tell me about," he said, speaking half to Peter and half to himself. "I could *feel* it. I wish I could have seen her face."

He set out over the plain; and then, as if remembering that he must explain the matter to Peter, he said:

"She can't get out tonight, *Pied-Bot*, but she'll come to us in the jackpines tomorrow afternoon. We'll have to wait."

He tried to say the thing cheerfully, but between this night and tomorrow afternoon seemed an interminable time, now that he was determined to make a clean breast of his affairs to Nada, and leave the country. Most of that night he walked in the coolness of the moonlit plain, and for a long time he sat amid the flower-scented shadows of the trysting-place in the heart of the jackpine clump, where Nada had a hidden place all her own. It was here that Peter discovered something which Jolly Roger could not see in the deep shadows, a bundle warm and soft and sweet with the presence of Nada herself. It was hidden under a clump of young banksians, very carefully hidden, and tucked about with grass and evergreen boughs. When McKay left the jackpines he wondered why it was that Peter showed no inclination to follow him until he was urged.

They did not return to the Stew-Kettle until dawn, and most of that day Jolly Roger spent in sleep between the two big rocks. It was late afternoon when they made their last meal. In this farewell hour McKay climbed up close to the pinnacle, where he smoked his pipe and measured the shadows of the declining sun until it was time to leave for the jackpines.

Retracing his steps to the hiding place under Gog and Magog he looked for Peter. But Peter's sand-wallow was empty, and Peter was gone.

CHAPTER VII

Peter was on his way to the mystery of the bundle he had found in the jackpines.

At the foot of the ridge, where the green plain fought with the blighting edge of the Stew-Kettle, he stood for many minutes before he started east-ward. With keen eyes gleaming behind his mop of scraggly face-bristles he critically surveyed both land and air, and then, with the slight limp in his gait which would always remain as a mark of Jed Hawkins' brutality, he trotted deliberately in the direction of the whiskey-runner's cabin home.

A bitter memory of Jed Hawkins flattened his ears when he came near the rock-cluttered coulee in which he had fought for Nada, and had suffered his broken bones, and today – even as he obeyed the instinctive caution to stop and listen – Jed Hawkins himself came out of the mouth of the coulee, bearing a brown jug in one hand and a thick cudgel in the other. His one wicked eye gleamed in the waning sun. His lean and scraggly face was alight with a sinister exultation as he paused for a moment close to the rock behind which Peter was hidden, and Peter's fangs lay bare and his body trembled while the man stood there. Then he moved on, and Peter did not stir, but waited until the jug and the cudgel and the man were out of sight.

Low under his breath he was snarling when he went on. Hatred, for a moment, had flamed hot in his soul. Then he turned, and buried himself in a clump of balsams that reached out into the plain, and a few moments later came to the edge of a tiny meadow in the heart of them, where a warbler was bursting its throat in evening-song.

Around the edge of the meadow Peter circled, his feet deep in buttercups and red fire-flowers, and crushing softly ripe strawberries that grew in scarlet profusion in the open, until he came to a screen of young jackpines, and through these he quietly and apologetically nosed his way. Then he stood wagging his tail, with Nada sitting on the grass half a dozen steps from him, wiping the strawberry stain from her finger-tips. And the stain was on her red lips, and a bit of it against the flush of her cheek, as she gave a little cry of gladness and greeting to Peter. Her eyes flashed beyond him, and every drop of blood in her slim, beautiful little body seemed to be throbbing with an excitement new to Peter as she looked for Jolly Roger.

Peter went to her, and dropped down, with his head in her lap, and looking up through his bushy eye-brows he saw a livid bruise just under the ripples of her brown hair, where there had been no mark yesterday, or the day before. Nada's hands drew him closer, until he was half in her lap, and she bent her face down to him, so that her thick, shining hair fell all about him. Peter loved her hair, almost as much as Jolly Roger loved it, and he closed his eyes and drew a deep breath of content as the smothering sweetness of it shut out the sunlight from him.

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