Curwood James Oliver

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The Valley of Silent Men / A Story of the Three River Country:

Содержание

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THE VALLEY OF SILENT MEN

Before the railroad's thin lines of steel bit their way up through the wilderness, Athabasca Landing was the picturesque threshold over which one must step who would enter into the mystery and adventure of the great white North. It is still *Iskwatam*– the "door" which opens to the lower reaches of the Athabasca, the Slave, and the Mackenzie. It is somewhat difficult to find on the map, yet it is there, because its history is written in more than a hundred and forty years of romance and tragedy and adventure in the lives of men, and is not easily forgotten. Over the old trail it was about a hundred and fifty miles north of Edmonton. The railroad has brought it nearer to that base of civilization, but beyond it the wilderness still howls as it has howled for a thousand years, and the waters of a continent flow north and into the Arctic Ocean. It is possible that the beautiful dream of the real-estate dealers may come true, for the most avid of all the sportsmen

of the earth, the money-hunters, have come up on the bumpy railroad that sometimes lights its sleeping cars with lanterns, and with them have come typewriters, and stenographers, and the art of printing advertisements, and the Golden Rule of those who sell handfuls of earth to hopeful purchasers thousands of miles away – "Do others as they would do you." And with it, too, has come the legitimate business of barter and trade, with eyes on all that treasure of the North which lies between the Grand Rapids of the Athabasca and the edge of the polar sea. But still more beautiful than the dream of fortunes quickly made is the deep-forest superstition that the spirits of the wilderness dead move onward as steam and steel advance, and if this is so, the ghosts of a thousand Pierres and Jacquelines have risen uneasily from their graves at Athabasca Landing, hunting a new quiet farther north.

For it was Pierre and Jacqueline, Henri and Marie, Jacques and his Jeanne, whose brown hands for a hundred and forty years opened and closed this door. And those hands still master a savage world for two thousand miles north of that threshold of Athabasca Landing. South of it a wheezy engine drags up the freight that came not so many months ago by boat.

It is over this threshold that the dark eyes of Pierre and Jacqueline, Henri and Marie, Jacques and his Jeanne, look into the blue and the gray and the sometimes watery ones of a destroying civilization. And there it is that the shriek of a mad locomotive mingles with their age-old river chants; the smut of coal drifts over their forests; the phonograph screeches its reply

to *le violon*; and Pierre and Henri and Jacques no longer find themselves the kings of the earth when they come in from far countries with their precious cargoes of furs. And they no longer swagger and tell loud-voiced adventure, or sing their wild river songs in the same old abandon, for there are streets at Athabasca Landing now, and hotels, and schools, and rules and regulations of a kind new and terrifying to the bold of the old *voyageurs*.

It seems only yesterday that the railroad was not there, and a great world of wilderness lay between the Landing and the upper rim of civilization. And when word first came that a steam thing was eating its way up foot by foot through forest and swamp and impassable muskeg, that word passed up and down the water-ways for two thousand miles, a colossal joke, a stupendous bit of drollery, the funniest thing that Pierre and Henri and Jacques had heard in all their lives. And when Jacques wanted to impress upon Pierre his utter disbelief of a thing, he would say:

"It will happen, m'sieu, when the steam thing comes to the Landing, when cow-beasts eat with the moose, and when our bread is found for us in yonder swamps!"

And the steam thing came, and cows grazed where moose had fed, and bread WAS gathered close to the edge of the great swamps. Thus did civilization break into Athabasca Landing.

Northward from the Landing, for two thousand miles, reached the domain of the rivermen. And the Landing, with its two hundred and twenty-seven souls before the railroad came, was the wilderness clearing-house which sat at the beginning of

things. To it came from the south all the freight which must go into the north; on its flat river front were built the great scows which carried this freight to the end of the earth. It was from the Landing that the greatest of all river brigades set forth upon their long adventures, and it was back to the Landing, perhaps a year or more later, that still smaller scows and huge canoes brought as the price of exchange their cargoes of furs.

Thus for nearly a century and a half the larger craft, with their great sweeps and their wild-throated crews, had gone *down* the river toward the Arctic Ocean, and the smaller craft, with their still wilder crews, had come *up* the river toward civilization. The River, as the Landing speaks of it, is the Athabasca, with its headwaters away off in the British Columbian mountains, where Baptiste and McLeod, explorers of old, gave up their lives to find where the cradle of it lay. And it sweeps past the Landing, a slow and mighty giant, unswervingly on its way to the northern sea. With it the river brigades set forth. For Pierre and Henri and Jacques it is going from one end to the other of the earth. The Athabasca ends and is replaced by the Slave, and the Slave empties into Great Slave Lake, and from the narrow tip of that Lake the Mackenzie carries on for more than a thousand miles to the sea.

In this distance of the long water trail one sees and hears many things. It is life. It is adventure. It is mystery and romance and hazard. Its tales are so many that books could not hold them. In the faces of men and women they are written. They lie buried

in graves so old that the forest trees grow over them. Epics of tragedy, of love, of the fight to live! And as one goes farther north, and still farther, just so do the stories of things that have happened change.

For the world is changing, the sun is changing, and the breeds of men are changing. At the Landing in July there are seventeen hours of sunlight; at Fort Chippewyan there are eighteen; at Fort Resolution, Fort Simpson, and Fort Providence there are nineteen; at the Great Bear twenty-one, and at Fort McPherson, close to the polar sea, from twenty-two to twenty-three. And in December there are also these hours of darkness. With light and darkness men change, women change, and life changes. And Pierre and Henri and Jacques meet them all, but always THEY are the same, chanting the old songs, enshrining the old loves, dreaming the same dreams, and worshiping always the same gods. They meet a thousand perils with eyes that glisten with the love of adventure.

The thunder of rapids and the howlings of storm do not frighten them. Death has no fear for them. They grapple with it, wrestle joyously with it, and are glorious when they win. Their blood is red and strong. Their hearts are big. Their souls chant themselves up to the skies. Yet they are simple as children, and when they are afraid, it is of things which children fear. For in those hearts of theirs is superstition – and also, perhaps, royal blood. For princes and the sons of princes and the noblest aristocracy of France were the first of the gentlemen adventurers

who came with ruffles on their sleeves and rapiers at their sides to seek furs worth many times their weight in gold two hundred and fifty years ago, and of these ancient forebears Pierre and Henri and Jacques, with their Maries and Jeannes and Jacquelines, are the living voices of today.

And these voices tell many stories. Sometimes they whisper them, as the wind would whisper, for there are stories weird and strange that must be spoken softly. They darken no printed pages. The trees listen to them beside red camp-fires at night. Lovers tell them in the glad sunshine of day. Some of them are chanted in song. Some of them come down through the generations, epics of the wilderness, remembered from father to son. And each year there are the new things to pass from mouth to mouth, from cabin to cabin, from the lower reaches of the Mackenzie to the far end of the world at Athabasca Landing. For the three rivers are always makers of romance, of tragedy, of adventure. The story will never be forgotten of how Follette and Ladouceur swam their mad race through the Death Chute for love of the girl who waited at the other end, or of how Campbell O'Doone, the red-headed giant at Fort Resolution, fought the whole of a great brigade in his effort to run away with a scow captain's daughter.

And the brigade loved O'Doone, though it beat him, for these men of the strong north love courage and daring. The epic of the lost scow – how there were men who saw it disappear from under their very eyes, floating upward and afterward riding swiftly away in the skies – is told and retold by strong-faced men,

deep in whose eyes are the smoldering flames of an undying superstition, and these same men thrill as they tell over again the strange and unbelievable story of Hartshope, the aristocratic Englishman who set off into the North in all the glory of monocle and unprecedented luggage, and how he joined in a tribal war, became a chief of the Dog Ribs, and married a dark-eyed, sleek-haired, little Indian beauty, who is now the mother of his children.

But deepest and most thrilling of all the stories they tell are the stories of the long arm of the Law – that arm which reaches for two thousand miles from Athabasca Landing to the polar sea, the arm Of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police.

And of these it is the story of Jim Kent we are going to tell, of Jim Kent and of Marette, that wonderful little goddess of the Valley of Silent Men, in whose veins there must have run the blood of fighting men – and of ancient queens. A story of the days before the railroad came.

CHAPTER I

In the mind of James Grenfell Kent, sergeant in the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, there remained no shadow of a doubt. He knew that he was dying. He had implicit faith in Cardigan, his surgeon friend, and Cardigan had told him that what was left of his life would be measured out in hours – perhaps in minutes or seconds. It was an unusual case. There was one chance in fifty that he might live two or three days, but there was no chance at all that he would live more than three. The end might come with any breath he drew into his lungs. That was the pathological history of the thing, as far as medical and surgical science knew of cases similar to his own.

Personally, Kent did not feel like a dying man. His vision and his brain were clear. He felt no pain, and only at infrequent intervals was his temperature above normal. His voice was particularly calm and natural.

At first he had smiled incredulously when Cardigan broke the news. That the bullet which a drunken half-breed had sent into his chest two weeks before had nicked the arch of the aorta, thus forming an aneurism, was a statement by Cardigan which did not sound especially wicked or convincing to him. "Aorta" and "aneurism" held about as much significance for him as his perichondrium or the process of his stylomastoid. But Kent possessed an unswerving passion to grip at facts in detail, a

characteristic that had largely helped him to earn the reputation of being the best man-hunter in all the northland service. So he had insisted, and his surgeon friend had explained.

The aorta, he found, was the main blood-vessel arching over and leading from the heart, and in nicking it the bullet had so weakened its outer wall that it bulged out in the form of a sack, just as the inner tube of an automobile tire bulges through the outer casing when there is a blowout.

"And when that sack gives way inside you," Cardigan had explained, "you'll go like that!" He snapped a forefinger and thumb to drive the fact home.

After that it was merely a matter of common sense to believe, and now, sure that he was about to die. Kent had acted. He was acting in the full health of his mind and in extreme cognizance of the paralyzing shock he was contributing as a final legacy to the world at large, or at least to that part of it which knew him or was interested. The tragedy of the thing did not oppress him. A thousand times in his life he had discovered that humor and tragedy were very closely related, and that there were times when only the breadth of a hair separated the two. Many times he had seen a laugh change suddenly to tears, and tears to laughter.

The tableau, as it presented itself about his bedside now, amused him. Its humor was grim, but even in these last hours of his life he appreciated it. He had always more or less regarded life as a joke – a very serious joke, but a joke for all that – a whimsical and trickful sort of thing played by the Great Arbiter

on humanity at large; and this last count in his own life, as it was solemnly and tragically ticking itself off, was the greatest joke of all. The amazed faces that stared at him, their passing moments of disbelief, their repressed but at times visible betrayals of horror, the steadiness of their eyes, the tenseness of their lips – all added to what he might have called, at another time, the dramatic artistry of his last great adventure.

That he was dying did not chill him, or make him afraid, or put a tremble into his voice. The contemplation of throwing off the mere habit of breathing had never at any stage of his thirty-six years of life appalled him. Those years, because he had spent a sufficient number of them in the raw places of the earth, had given him a philosophy and viewpoint of his own, both of which he kept unto himself without effort to impress them on other people. He believed that life itself was the cheapest thing on the face of all the earth. All other things had their limitations.

There was so much water and so much land, so many mountains and so many plains, so many square feet to live on and so many square feet to be buried in. All things could be measured, and stood up, and catalogued – except life itself. "Given time," he would say, "a single pair of humans can populate all creation." Therefore, being the cheapest of all things, it was true philosophy that life should be the easiest of all things to give up when the necessity came.

Which is only another way of emphasizing that Kent was not, and never had been, afraid to die. But it does not say that he

treasured life a whit less than the man in another room, who, a day or so before, had fought like a lunatic before going under an anesthetic for the amputation of a bad finger. No man had loved life more than he. No man had lived nearer it.

It had been a passion with him. Full of dreams, and always with anticipations ahead, no matter how far short realizations fell, he was an optimist, a lover of the sun and the moon and the stars, a worshiper of the forests and of the mountains, a man who loved his life, and who had fought for it, and yet who was ready – at the last – to yield it up without a whimper when the fates asked for it.

Bolstered up against his pillows, he did not look the part of the fiend he was confessing himself to be to the people about him. Sickness had not emaciated him. The bronze of his lean, clean-cut face had faded a little, but the tanning of wind and sun and campfire was still there. His blue eyes were perhaps dulled somewhat by the nearness of death. One would not have judged him to be thirty-six, even though over one temple there was a streak of gray in his blond hair – a heritage from his mother, who was dead. Looking at him, as his lips quietly and calmly confessed himself beyond the pale of men's sympathy or forgiveness, one would have said that his crime was impossible.

Through his window, as he sat bolstered up in his cot, Kent could see the slow-moving shimmer of the great Athabasca River as it moved on its way toward the Arctic Ocean. The sun was shining, and he saw the cool, thick masses of the spruce and cedar forests beyond, the rising undulations of wilderness ridges and

hills, and through that open window he caught the sweet scents that came with a soft wind from out of the forests he had loved for so many years.

"They've been my best friends," he had said to Cardigan, "and when this nice little thing you're promising happens to me, old man, I want to go with my eyes on them."

So his cot was close to the window.

Nearest to him sat Cardigan. In his face, more than in any of the others, was disbelief. Kedsty, Inspector of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, in charge of N Division during an indefinite leave of absence of the superintendent, was paler even than the girl whose nervous fingers were swiftly putting upon paper every word that was spoken by those in the room. O'Connor, staff-sergeant, was like one struck dumb. The little, smooth-faced Catholic missioner whose presence as a witness Kent had requested, sat with his thin fingers tightly interlaced, silently placing this among all the other strange tragedies that the wilderness had given up to him. They had all been Kent's friends, his intimate friends, with the exception of the girl, whom Inspector Kedsty had borrowed for the occasion. With the little missioner he had spent many an evening, exchanging in mutual confidence the strange and mysterious happenings of the deep forests, and of the great north beyond the forests. O'Connor's friendship was a friendship bred of the brotherhood of the trails. It was Kent and O'Connor who had brought down the two Eskimo murderers from the mouth of the Mackenzie,

and the adventure had taken them fourteen months. Kent loved O'Connor, with his red face, his red hair, and his big heart, and to him the most tragic part of it all was that he was breaking this friendship now.

But it was Inspector Kedsty, commanding N Division, the biggest and wildest division in all the Northland, that roused in Kent an unusual emotion, even as he waited for that explosion just over his heart which the surgeon had told him might occur at any moment. On his death-bed his mind still worked analytically. And Kedsty, since the moment he had entered the room, had puzzled Kent. The commander of N Division was an unusual man. He was sixty, with iron-gray hair, cold, almost colorless eyes in which one would search long for a gleam of either mercy or fear, and a nerve that Kent had never seen even slightly disturbed. It took such a man, an iron man, to run N Division according to law, for N Division covered an area of six hundred and twenty thousand square miles of wildest North America, extending more than two thousand miles north of the 70th parallel of latitude, with its farthest limit three and one-half degrees within the Arctic Circle. To police this area meant upholding the law in a country fourteen times the size of the state of Ohio. And Kedsty was the man who had performed this duty as only one other man had ever succeeded in doing it.

Yet Kedsty, of the five about Kent, was most disturbed. His face was ash-gray. A number of times Kent had detected a broken note in his voice. He had seen his hands grip at the arms of the

chair he sat in until the cords stood out on them as if about to burst. He had never seen Kedsty sweat until now.

Twice the Inspector had wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He was no longer *Minisak*– "The Rock" – a name given to him by the Crees. The armor that no shaft had ever penetrated seemed to have dropped from him. He had ceased to be Kedsty, the most dreaded inquisitor in the service. He was nervous, and Kent could see that he was fighting to repossess himself.

"Of course you know what this means to the Service," he said in a hard, low voice. "It means – "

"Disgrace," nodded Kent. "I know. It means a black spot on the otherwise bright escutcheon of N Division. But it can't be helped. I killed John Barkley. The man you've got in the guard-house, condemned to be hanged by the neck until he is dead, is innocent. I understand. It won't be nice for the Service to let it be known that a sergeant in His Majesty's Royal Mounted is an ordinary murderer, but – "

"Not an *ordinary* murderer," interrupted Kedsty. "As you have described it, the crime was deliberate – horrible and inexcusable to its last detail. You were not moved by a sudden passion. You tortured your victim. It is inconceivable!"

"And yet true," said Kent.

He was looking at the stenographer's slim fingers as they put down his words and Kedsty's. A bit of sunshine touched her bowed head, and he observed the red lights in her hair. His eyes

swept to O'Connor, and in that moment the commander of N Division bent over him, so close that his face almost touched Kent's, and he whispered, in a voice so low that no one of the other four could hear,

"*Kent – you lie*!"

"No, it is true," replied Kent.

Kedsty drew back, again wiping the moisture from his forehead.

"I killed Barkley, and I killed him as I planned that he should die," Kent went on. "It was my desire that he should suffer. The one thing which I shall not tell you is *why* I killed him. But it was a sufficient reason."

He saw the shuddering tremor that swept through the shoulders of the girl who was putting down the condemning notes.

"And you refuse to confess your motive?"

"Absolutely – except that he had wronged me in a way that deserved death."

"And you make this confession knowing that you are about to die?"

The flicker of a smile passed over Kent's lips. He looked at O'Connor and for an instant saw in O'Connor's eyes a flash of their old comradeship.

"Yes. Dr. Cardigan has told me. Otherwise I should have let the man in the guard-house hang. It's simply that this accursed bullet has spoiled my luck – and saved him!"

Kedsty spoke to the girl. For half an hour she read her notes, and after that Kent wrote his name on the last page. Then Kedsty rose from his chair.

"We have finished, gentlemen," he said.

They trailed out, the girl hurrying through the door first in her desire to free herself of an ordeal that had strained every nerve in her body. The commander of N Division was last to go. Cardigan hesitated, as if to remain, but Kedsty motioned him on. It was Kedsty who closed the door, and as he closed it he looked back, and for a flash Kent met his eyes squarely. In that moment he received an impression which he had not caught while the Inspector was in the room. It was like an electrical shock in its unexpectedness, and Kedsty must have seen the effect of it in his face, for he moved back quickly and closed the door. In that instant Kent had seen in Kedsty's eyes and face a look that was not only of horror, but what in the face and eyes of another man he would have sworn was fear.

It was a gruesome moment in which to smile, but Kent smiled. The shock was over. By the rules of the Criminal Code he knew that Kedsty even now was instructing Staff-Sergeant O'Connor to detail an officer to guard his door. The fact that he was ready to pop off at any moment would make no difference in the regulations of the law. And Kedsty was a stickler for the law as it was written. Through the closed door he heard voices indistinctly. Then there were footsteps, dying away. He could hear the heavy thump, thump of O'Connor's big feet. O'Connor

had always walked like that, even on the trail.

Softly then the door reopened, and Father Layonne, the little missioner, came in. Kent knew that this would be so, for Father Layonne knew neither code nor creed that did not reach all the hearts of the wilderness. He came back, and sat down close to Kent, and took one of his hands and held it closely in both of his own. They were not the soft, smooth hands of the priestly hierarchy, but were hard with the callosity of toil, yet gentle with the gentleness of a great sympathy. He had loved Kent yesterday, when Kent had stood clean in the eyes of both God and men, and he still loved him today, when his soul was stained with a thing that must be washed away with his own life.

"I'm sorry, lad," he said. "I'm sorry."

Something rose up in Kent's throat that was not the blood he had been wiping away since morning. His fingers returned the pressure of the little missioner's hands. Then he pointed out through the window to the panorama of shimmering river and green forests.

"It is hard to say good-by to all that, Father," he said. "But, if you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it. I'm not afraid of it. And why be unhappy because one has only a little while to live? Looking back over your life, does it seem so very long ago that you were a boy, a small boy?"

"The time has gone swiftly, very swiftly."

"It seems only yesterday – or so?"

"Yes, only yesterday – or so."

Kent's face lit up with the whimsical smile that long ago had reached the little missioner's heart. "Well, that's the way I'm looking at it, Father. There is only a yesterday, a today, and a tomorrow in the longest of our lives. Looking back from seventy years isn't much different from looking back from thirty-six *when* you're looking back and not ahead. Do you think what I have just said will free Sandy McTrigger?"

"There is no doubt. Your statements have been accepted as a death-bed confession."

The little missioner, instead of Kent, was betraying a bit of nervousness.

"There are matters, my son – some few matters – which you will want attended to. Shall we not talk about them?"

"You mean – "

"Your people, first. I remember that once you told me there was no one. But surely there is some one somewhere."

Kent shook his head. "There is no one now. For ten years those forests out there have been father, mother, and home to me."

"But there must be personal affairs, affairs which you would like to entrust, perhaps, to me?"

Kent's face brightened, and for an instant a flash of humor leaped into his eyes. "It is funny," he chuckled. "Since you remind me of it, Father, it is quite in form to make my will. I've bought a few little pieces of land here. Now that the railroad has almost reached us from Edmonton, they've jumped up from the seven or eight hundred dollars I gave for them to about ten

thousand. I want you to sell the lots and use the money in your work. Put as much of it on the Indians as you can. They've always been good brothers to me. And I wouldn't waste much time in getting my signature on some sort of paper to that effect."

Father Layonne's eyes shone softly. "God will bless you for that, Jimmy," he said, using the intimate name by which he had known him. "And I think He is going to pardon you for something else, if you have the courage to ask Him."

"I am pardoned," replied Kent, looking out through the window. "I feel it. I know it, Father."

In his soul the little missioner was praying. He knew that Kent's religion was not his religion, and he did not press the service which he would otherwise have rendered. After a moment he rose to his feet, and it was the old Kent who looked up into his face, the clean-faced, gray-eyed, unafraid Kent, smiling in the old way.

"I have one big favor to ask of you, Father," he said. "If I've got a day to live, I don't want every one forcing the fact on me that I'm dying. If I've any friends left, I want them to come in and see me, and talk, and crack jokes. I want to smoke my pipe. I'll appreciate a box of cigars if you'll send 'em up. Cardigan can't object now. Will you arrange these things for me? They'll listen to you – and please shove my cot a little nearer the window before you go."

Father Layonne performed the service in silence. Then at last the yearning overcame him to have the soul speak out, that his

God might be more merciful, and he said: "My boy, you are sorry? You repent that you killed John Barkley?"

"No, I'm not sorry. It had to be done. And please don't forget the cigars, will you, Father?"

"No, I won't forget," said the little missioner, and turned away.

As the door opened and closed behind him, the flash of humor leaped into Kent's eyes again, and he chuckled even as he wiped another of the telltale stains of blood from his lips. He had played the game. And the funny part about it was that no one in all the world would ever know, except himself – and perhaps one other.

CHAPTER II

Outside Kent's window was Spring, the glorious Spring of the Northland, and in spite of the death-grip that was tightening in his chest he drank it in deeply and leaned over so that his eyes traveled over wide spaces of the world that had been his only a short time before.

It occurred to him that he had suggested this knoll that overlooked both settlement and river as the site for the building which Dr. Cardigan called his hospital. It was a structure rough and unadorned, unpainted, and sweetly smelling with the aroma of the spruce trees from the heart of which its unplaned lumber was cut. The breath of it was a thing to bring cheer and hope. Its silvery walls, in places golden and brown with pitch and freckled with knots, spoke joyously of life that would not die, and the woodpeckers came and hammered on it as though it were still a part of the forest, and red squirrels chattered on the roof and scampered about in play with a soft patter of feet.

"It's a pretty poor specimen of man that would die up here with all that under his eyes," Kent had said a year before, when he and Cardigan had picked out the site. "If he died looking at that, why, he just simply ought to die, Cardigan," he had laughed.

And now he was that poor specimen, looking out on the glory of the world!

His vision took in the South and a part of the East and West,

and in all those directions there was no end of the forest. It was like a vast, many-colored sea with uneven billows rising and falling until the blue sky came down to meet them many miles away. More than once his heart ached at the thought of the two thin ribs of steel creeping up foot by foot and mile by mile from Edmonton, a hundred and fifty miles away. It was, to him, a desecration, a crime against Nature, the murder of his beloved wilderness. For in his soul that wilderness had grown to be more than a thing of spruce and cedar and balsam, of poplar and birch; more than a great, unused world of river and lake and swamp. It was an individual, a thing. His love for it was greater than his love for man. It was his inarticulate God. It held him as no religion in the world could have held him, and deeper and deeper it had drawn him into the soul of itself, delivering up to him one by one its guarded secrets and its mysteries, opening for him page by page the book that was the greatest of all books. And it was the wonder of it now, the fact that it was near him, about him, embracing him, glowing for him in the sunshine, whispering to him in the soft breath of the air, nodding and talking to him from the crest of every ridge, that gave to him a strange happiness even in these hours when he knew that he was dying.

And then his eyes fell nearer to the settlement which nestled along the edge of the shining river a quarter of a mile away. That, too, had been the wilderness, in the days before the railroad came. The poison of speculation was stirring, but it had not yet destroyed. Athabasca Landing was still the door that opened and

closed on the great North. Its buildings were scattered and few, and built of logs and rough lumber. Even now he could hear the drowsy hum of the distant sawmill that was lazily turning out its grist. Not far away the wind-worn flag of the British Empire was floating over a Hudson Bay Company's post that had bartered in the trades of the North for more than a hundred years. Through that hundred years Athabasca Landing had pulsed with the heart-beats of strong men bred to the wilderness. Through it, working its way by river and dog sledge from the South, had gone the precious freight for which the farther North gave in exchange its still more precious furs. And today, as Kent looked down upon it, he saw that same activity as it had existed through the years of a century. A brigade of scows, laden to their gunwales, was just sweeping out into the river and into its current. Kent had watched the loading of them; now he saw them drifting lazily out from the shore, their long sweeps glinting in the sun, their crews singing wildly and fiercely their beloved Chanson des Voyageurs as their faces turned to the adventure of the North.

In Kent's throat rose a thing which he tried to choke back, but which broke from his lips in a low cry, almost a sob. He heard the distant singing, wild and free as the forests themselves, and he wanted to lean out of his window and shout a last good-by. For the brigade – a Company brigade, the brigade that had chanted its songs up and down the water reaches of the land for more than two hundred and fifty years – was starting north. And he knew where it was going – north, and still farther north; a hundred

miles, five hundred, a thousand – and then another thousand before the last of the scows unburdened itself of its precious freight. For the lean and brown-visaged men who went with them there would be many months of clean living and joyous thrill under the open skies. Overwhelmed by the yearning that swept over him, Kent leaned back against his pillows and covered his eyes.

In those moments his brain painted for him swiftly and vividly the things he was losing. Tomorrow or next day he would be dead, and the river brigade would still be sweeping on – on into the Grand Rapids of the Athabasca, fighting the Death Chute, hazarding valiantly the rocks and rapids of the Grand Cascade, the whirlpools of the Devil's Mouth, the thundering roar and boiling dragon teeth of the Black Run – on to the end of the Athabasca, to the Slave, and into the Mackenzie, until the last rock-blunted nose of the outfit drank the tide-water of the Arctic Ocean. And he, James Kent, would be DEAD!

He uncovered his eyes, and there was a wan smile on his lips as he looked forth once more. There were sixteen scows in the brigade, and the biggest, he knew, was captained by Pierre Rossand. He could fancy Pierre's big red throat swelling in mighty song, for Pierre's wife was waiting for him a thousand miles away. The scows were caught steadily now in the grip of the river, and it seemed to Kent, as he watched them go, that they were the last fugitives fleeing from the encroaching monsters of steel. Unconscious of the act, he reached out his arms, and his

soul cried out its farewell, even though his lips were silent.

He was glad when they were gone and when the voices of the chanting oarsmen were lost in the distance. Again he listened to the lazy hum of the sawmill, and over his head he heard the velvety run of a red squirrel and then its reckless chattering. The forests came back to him. Across his cot fell a patch of golden sunlight. A stronger breath of air came laden with the perfume of balsam and cedar through his window, and when the door opened and Cardigan entered, he found the old Kent facing him.

There was no change in Cardigan's voice or manner as he greeted him. But there was a tenseness in his face which he could not conceal. He had brought in Kent's pipe and tobacco. These he laid on a table until he had placed his head close to Kent's hearty listening to what he called the *bruit*– the rushing of blood through the aneurismal sac.

"Seems to me that I can hear it myself now and then," said Kent. "Worse, isn't it?"

Cardigan nodded. "Smoking may hurry it up a bit," he said. "Still, if you want to – "

Kent held out his hand for the pipe and tobacco. "It's worth it. Thanks, old man."

Kent loaded the pipe, and Cardigan lighted a match. For the first time in two weeks a cloud of smoke issued from between Kent's lips.

"The brigade is starting north," he said.

"Mostly Mackenzie River freight," replied Cardigan. "A long

run."

"The finest in all the North. Three years ago O'Connor and I made it with the Follette outfit. Remember Follette – and Ladouceur? They both loved the same girl, and being good friends they decided to settle the matter by a swim through the Death Chute. The man who came through first was to have her. Gawd, Cardigan, what funny things happen! Follette came out first, but he was dead. He'd brained himself on a rock. And to this day Ladouceur hasn't married the girl, because he says Follette beat him; and that Follette's something-or-other would haunt him if he didn't play fair. It's a queer – "

He stopped and listened. In the hall was the approaching tread of unmistakable feet.

"O'Connor," he said.

Cardigan went to the door and opened it as O'Connor was about to knock. When the door closed again, the staff-sergeant was in the room alone with Kent. In one of his big hands he clutched a box of cigars, and in the other he held a bunch of vividly red fire-flowers.

"Father Layonne shoved these into my hands as I was coming up," he explained, dropping them on the table. "And I – well – I'm breaking regulations to come up an' tell you something, Jimmy. I never called you a liar in my life, but I'm calling you one now!"

He was gripping Kent's hands in the fierce clasp of a friendship that nothing could kill. Kent winced, but the pain of it was joy. He had feared that O'Connor, like Kedsty, must of

necessity turn against him. Then he noticed something unusual in O'Connor's face and eyes. The staff-sergeant was not easily excited, yet he was visibly disturbed now.

"I don't know what the others saw, when you were making that confession, Kent. Mebby my eyesight was better because I spent a year and a half with you on the trail. You were lying. What's your game, old man?"

Kent groaned. "Have I got to go all over it again?" he appealed.

O'Connor began thumping back and forth over the floor. Kent had seen him that way sometimes in camp when there were perplexing problems ahead of them.

"You didn't kill John Barkley," he insisted. "I don't believe you did, and Inspector Kedsty doesn't believe it – yet the mighty queer part of it is – "

"What?"

"That Kedsty is acting on your confession in a big hurry. I don't believe it's according to Hoyle, as the regulations are written. But he's doing it. And I want to know – it's the biggest thing I EVER wanted to know – did you kill Barkley?"

"O'Connor, if you don't believe a dying man's word – you haven't much respect for death, have you?"

"That's the theory on which the law works, but sometimes it ain't human. Confound it, man, *did you*?"

"Yes."

O'Connor sat down and with his finger-nails pried open the box of cigars. "Mind if I smoke with you?" he asked. "I need it.

I'm shot up with unexpected things this morning. Do you care if I ask you about the girl?"

"The girl!" exclaimed Kent. He sat up straighter, staring at O'Connor.

The staff-sergeant's eyes were on him with questioning steadiness. "I see – you don't know her," he said, lighting his cigar. "Neither do I. Never saw her before. That's why I am wondering about Inspector Kedsty. I tell you, it's queer. He didn't believe you this morning, yet he was all shot up. He wanted me to go with him to his house. The cords stood out on his neck like that – like my little finger.

"Then suddenly he changed his mind and said we'd go to the office. That took us along the road that runs through the poplar grove. It happened there. I'm not much of a girl's man, Kent, and I'd be a fool to try to tell you what she looked like. But there she was, standing in the path not ten feet ahead of us, and she stopped me in my tracks as quick as though she'd sent a shot into me. And she stopped Kedsty, too. I heard him give a sort of grunt – a funny sound, as though some one had hit him. I don't believe I could tell whether she had a dress on or not, for I never saw anything like her face, and her eyes, and her hair, and I stared at them like a thunder-struck fool. She didn't seem to notice me any more than if I'd been thin air, a ghost she couldn't see.

"She looked straight at Kedsty, and she kept looking at him – and then she passed us. Never said a word, mind you. She came so near I could have touched her with my hand, and not until

she was that close did she take her eyes from Kedsty and look at me. And when she'd passed I thought what a couple of cursed idiots we were, standing there paralyzed, as if we'd never seen a beautiful girl before in our lives. I went to remark that much to the Old Man when – "

O'Connor bit his cigar half in two as he leaned nearer to the cot.

"Kent, I swear that Kedsty was as white as chalk when I looked at him! There wasn't a drop of blood left in his face, and he was staring straight ahead, as though the girl still stood there, and he gave another of those grunts – it wasn't a laugh – as if something was choking him. And then he said:

"'Sergeant, I've forgotten something important. I must go back to see Dr. Cardigan. You have my authority to give McTrigger his liberty at once!'"

O'Connor paused, as if expecting some expression of disbelief from Kent. When none came, he demanded,

"Was that according to the Criminal Code? Was it, Kent?"

"Not exactly. But, coming from the S.O.D., it was law."

"And I obeyed it," grunted the staff-sergeant. "And if you could have seen McTrigger! When I told him he was free, and unlocked his cell, he came out of it gropingly, like a blind man. And he would go no farther than the Inspector's office. He said he would wait there for him."

"And Kedsty?"

O'Connor jumped from his chair and began thumping back

and forth across the room again. "Followed the girl," he exploded. "He couldn't have done anything else. He lied to me about Cardigan. There wouldn't be anything mysterious about it if he wasn't sixty and she less than twenty. She was pretty enough! But it wasn't her beauty that made him turn white there in the path. Not on your life it wasn't! I tell you he aged ten years in as many seconds. There was something in that girl's eyes more terrifying to him than a leveled gun, and after he'd looked into them, his first thought was of McTrigger, the man you're saving from the hangman. It's queer, Kent. The whole business is queer. And the queerest of it all is your confession."

"Yes, it's all very funny," agreed Kent. "That's what I've been telling myself right along, old man. You see, a little thing like a bullet changed it all. For if the bullet hadn't got me, I assure you I wouldn't have given Kedsty that confession, and an innocent man would have been hanged. As it is, Kedsty is shocked, demoralized. I'm the first man to soil the honor of the finest Service on the face of the earth, and I'm in Kedsty's division. Quite natural that he should be upset. And as for the girl – "

He shrugged his shoulders and tried to laugh. "Perhaps she came in this morning with one of the up-river scows and was merely taking a little constitutional," he suggested. "Didn't you ever notice, O'Connor, that in a certain light under poplar trees one's face is sometimes ghastly?"

"Yes, I've noticed it, when the trees are in full leaf, but not

when they're just opening, Jimmy. It was the girl. Her eyes shattered every nerve in him. And his first words were an order for me to free McTrigger, coupled with the lie that he was coming back to see Cardigan. And if you could have seen her eyes when she turned them on me! They were blue – blue as violets – but shooting fire. I could imagine black eyes like that, but not blue ones. Kedsty simply wilted in their blaze. And there was a reason – I know it – a reason that sent his mind like lightning to the man in the cell!"

"Now, that you leave me out of it, the thing begins to get interesting," said Kent. "It's a matter of the relationship of this blonde girl and – "

"She isn't blonde – and I'm not leaving you out of it," interrupted O'Connor. "I never saw anything so black in my life as her hair. It was magnificent. If you saw that girl once, you would never forget her again as long as you lived. She has never been in Athabasca Landing before, or anywhere near here. If she had, we surely would have heard about her. She came for a purpose, and I believe that purpose was accomplished when Kedsty gave me the order to free McTrigger."

"That's possible, and probable," agreed Kent. "I always said you were the best clue-analyst in the force, Bucky. But I don't see where I come in."

O'Connor smiled grimly. "You don't? Well, I may be both blind and a fool, and perhaps a little excited. But it seemed to me that from the moment Inspector Kedsty laid his eyes on that girl

he was a little too anxious to let McTrigger go and hang you in his place. A little too anxious, Kent."

The irony of the thing brought a hard smile to Kent's lips as he nodded for the cigars. "I'll try one of these on top of the pipe," he said, nipping off the end of the cigar with his teeth. "And you forget that I'm not going to hang, Bucky. Cardigan has given me until tomorrow night. Perhaps until the next day. Did you see Rossand's fleet leaving for up north? It made me think of three years ago!"

O'Connor was gripping his hand again. The coldness of it sent a chill into the staff-sergeant's heart. He rose and looked through the upper part of the window, so that the twitching in his throat was hidden from Kent. Then he went to the door.

"I'll see you again tomorrow," he said. "And if I find out anything more about the girl, I'll report."

He tried to laugh, but there was a tremble in his voice, a break in the humor he attempted to force.

Kent listened to the tramp of his heavy feet as they went down the hall.

CHAPTER III

Again the world came back to Kent, the world that lay just beyond his open window. But scarcely had O'Connor gone when it began to change, and in spite of his determination to keep hold of his nerve Kent felt creeping up with that change a thing that was oppressive and smothering. Swiftly the distant billowings of the forests were changing their tones and colors under the darkening approach of storm. The laughter of the hills and ridges went out. The shimmer of spruce and cedar and balsam turned to a somber black. The flashing gold and silver of birch and poplar dissolved into a ghostly and unanimated gray that was almost invisible. A deepening and somber gloom spread itself like a veil over the river that only a short time before had reflected the glory of the sun in the faces of dark-visaged men of the Company brigade. And with the gloom came steadily nearer a low rumbling of thunder.

For the first time since the mental excitement of his confession Kent felt upon him an appalling loneliness. He still was not afraid of death, but a part of his philosophy was gone. It was, after all, a difficult thing to die alone. He felt that the pressure in his chest was perceptible greater than it had been an hour or two before, and the thought grew upon him that it would be a terrible thing for the "explosion" to come when the sun was not shining. He wanted O'Connor back again. He had the desire to call out

for Cardigan. He would have welcomed Father Layonne with a glad cry. Yet more than all else would he have had at his side in these moments of distress a woman. For the storm, as it massed heavier and nearer, filling the earth with its desolation, bridged vast spaces for him, and he found himself suddenly face to face with the might-have-beens of yesterday.

He saw, as he had never guessed before, the immeasurable gulf between helplessness and the wild, brute freedom of man, and his soul cried out – not for adventure, not for the savage strength of life – but for the presence of a creature frailer than himself, yet in the gentle touch of whose hand lay the might of all humanity.

He struggled with himself. He remembered that Dr. Cardigan had told him there would be moments of deep depression, and he tried to fight himself out of the grip of this that was on him. There was a bell at hand, but he refused to use it, for he sensed his own cowardice. His cigar had gone out, and he relighted it. He made an effort to bring his mind back to O'Connor, and the mystery girl, and Kedsty. He tried to visualize McTrigger, the man he had saved from the hangman, waiting for Kedsty in the office at barracks. He pictured the girl, as O'Connor had described her, with her black hair and blue eyes – and then the storm broke.

The rain came down in a deluge, and scarcely had it struck when the door opened and Cardigan hurried in to close the window. He remained for half an hour, and after that young Mercer, one of his two assistants, came in at intervals. Late in

the afternoon it began to clear up, and Father Layonne returned with papers properly made out for Kent's signature. He was with Kent until sundown, when Mercer came in with supper.

Between that hour and ten o'clock Kent observed a vigilance on the part of Dr. Cardigan which struck him as being unusual. Four times he listened with the stethoscope at his chest, but when Kent asked the question which was in his mind, Cardigan shook his head.

"It's no worse, Kent. I don't think it will happen tonight."

In spite of this assurance Kent was positive there was in Cardigan's manner an anxiety of a different quality than he had perceived earlier in the day. The thought was a definite and convincing one. He believed that Cardigan was smoothing the way with a professional lie.

He had no desire to sleep. His light was turned low, and his window was open again, for the night had cleared. Never had air tasted sweeter to him than that which came in through his window. The little bell in his watch tinkled the hour of eleven, when he heard Cardigan's door close for a last time across the hall. After that everything was quiet. He drew himself nearer to the window, so that by leaning forward he could rest himself partly on the sill. He loved the night. The mystery and lure of those still hours of darkness when the world slept had never ceased to hold their fascination for him. Night and he were friends. He had discovered many of its secrets. A thousand times he had walked hand in hand with the spirit of it, approaching

each time a little nearer to the heart of it, mastering its life, its sound, the whispering languages of that "other side of life" which rises quietly and as if in fear to live and breathe long after the sun has gone out. To him it was more wonderful than day.

And this night that lay outside his window now was magnificent. Storm had washed the atmosphere between earth and sky, and it seemed as though the stars had descended nearer to his forests, shining in golden constellations. The moon was coming up late, and he watched the ruddy glow of it as it rode up over the wilderness, a splendid queen entering upon a stage already prepared by the lesser satellites for her coming. No longer was Kent oppressed or afraid. In still deeper inhalations he drank the night air into his lungs, and in him there seemed to grow slowly a new strength. His eyes and ears were wide open and attentive. The town was asleep, but a few lights burned dimly here and there along the river's edge, and occasionally a lazy sound came up to him – the clink of a scow chain, the bark of a dog, the rooster crowing. In spite of himself he smiled at that. Old Duperow's rooster was a foolish bird and always crowed himself hoarse when the moon was bright. And in front of him, not far away, were two white, lightning-shriven spruce stubs standing like ghosts in the night. In one of these a pair of owls had nested, and Kent listened to the queer, chuckling notes of their honeymooning and the flutter of their wings as they darted out now and then in play close to his window. And then suddenly he heard the sharp snap of their beaks. An enemy was prowling

near, and the owls were giving warning. He thought he heard a step. In another moment or two the step was unmistakable. Some one was approaching his window from the end of the building. He leaned over the sill and found himself staring into O'Connor's face.

"These confounded feet of mine!" grunted the staff-sergeant. "Were you asleep, Kent?"

"Wide-awake as those owls," assured Kent.

O'Connor drew up to the window. "I saw your light and thought you were awake," he said. "I wanted to make sure Cardigan wasn't with you. I don't want him to know I am here. And – if you don't mind – will you turn off the light? Kedsty is awake, too – as wide-awake as the owls."

Kent reached out a hand, and his room was in darkness except for the glow of moon and stars. O'Connor's bulk at the window shut out a part of this. His face was half in gloom.

"It's a crime to come to you like this, Kent," he said, keeping his big voice down to a whisper. "But I had to. It's my last chance. And I know there's something wrong. Kedsty is getting me out of the way – because I was with him when he met the girl over in the poplar bush. I'm detailed on special duty up at Fort Simpson, two thousand miles by water if it's a foot! It means six months or a year. We leave in the motor boat at dawn to overtake Rossand and his outfit, so I had to take this chance of seeing you. I hesitated until I knew that some one was awake in your room."

"I'm glad you came," said Kent warmly. "And – good God,

how I would like to go with you, Bucky! If it wasn't for this thing in my chest, ballooning up for an explosion – "

"I wouldn't be going," interrupted O'Connor in a low voice. "If you were on your feet, Kent, there are a number of things that wouldn't be happening. Something mighty queer has come over Kedsty since this morning. He isn't the Kedsty you knew yesterday or for the last ten years. He's nervous, and I miss my guess if he isn't constantly on the watch for some one. And he's afraid of me. I know it. He's afraid of me because I saw him go to pieces when he met that girl. Fort Simpson is simply a frame-up to get me away for a time. He tried to smooth the edge off the thing by promising me an inspectorship within the year. That was this afternoon, just before the storm. Since then – "

O'Connor turned and faced the moonlight for a moment.

"Since then I've been on a still-hunt for the girl and Sandy McTrigger," he added. "And they've disappeared, Kent. I guess McTrigger just melted away into the woods. But it's the girl that puzzles me. I've questioned every scow *cheman* at the Landing. I've investigated every place where she might have got food or lodging, and I bribed Mooie, the old trailer, to search the near-by timber. The unbelievable part of it isn't her disappearance. It's the fact that not a soul in Athabasca Landing has seen her! Sounds incredible, doesn't it? And then, Kent, the big hunch came to me. Remember how we've always played up to the big hunch? And this one struck me strong. I think I know where the girl is."

Kent, forgetful of his own impending doom, was deeply

interested in the thrill of O'Connor's mystery. He had begun to visualize the situation. More than once they had worked out enigmas of this kind together, and the staff-sergeant saw the old, eager glow in his eyes. And Kent chuckled joyously in that thrill of the game of man-hunting, and said:

"Kedsty is a bachelor and doesn't even so much as look at a woman. But he likes home life – "

"And has built himself a log bungalow somewhat removed from the town," added O'Connor.

"And his Chinaman cook and housekeeper is away."

"And the bungalow is closed, or supposed to be."

"Except at night, when Kedsty goes there to sleep."

O'Connor's hand gripped Kent's. "Jimmy, there never was a team in N Division that could beat us, The girl is hiding at Kedsty's place!"

"But why *hiding*?" insisted Kent. "She hasn't committed a crime."

O'Connor sat silent for a moment. Kent could hear him stuffing the bowl of his pipe.

"It's simply the big hunch," he grunted. "It's got hold of me, Kent, and I can't throw it off. Why, man – "

He lighted a match in the cup of his hands, and Kent saw his face. There was more than uncertainty in the hard, set lines of it.

"You see, I went back to the poplars again after I left you today," O'Connor went on. "I found her footprints. She had turned off the trail, and in places they were very clear.

"She had on high-heeled shoes, Kent – those Frenchy things – and I swear her feet can't be much bigger than a baby's! I found where Kedsty caught up with her, and the moss was pretty well beaten down. He returned through the poplars, but the girl went on and into the edge of the spruce. I lost her trail there. By traveling in that timber it was possible for her to reach Kedsty's bungalow without being seen. It must have been difficult going, with shoes half as big as my hand and heels two inches high! And I've been wondering, why didn't she wear bush-country shoes or moccasins?"

"Because she came from the South and not the North," suggested Kent. "Probably up from Edmonton."

"Exactly. And Kedsty wasn't expecting her, was he? If he had been, that first sight of her wouldn't have shattered every nerve in his body. That's why the big hunch won't let loose of me, Kent. From the moment he saw her, he was a different man. His attitude toward you changed instantly. If he could save you now by raising his little finger, he wouldn't do it, simply because it's absolutely necessary for him to have an excuse for freeing McTrigger. Your confession came at just the psychological moment. The girl's unspoken demand there in the poplars was that he free McTrigger, and it was backed up by a threat which Kedsty understood and which terrified him to his marrow. McTrigger must have seen him afterward, for he waited at the office until Kedsty came. I don't know what passed between them. Constable Doyle says they were together for half

an hour. Then McTrigger walked out of barracks, and no one has seen him since. It's mighty queer. The whole thing is queer. And the queerest part of the whole business is this sudden commission of mine at Fort Simpson."

Kent leaned back against his pillows. His breath came in a series of short, hacking coughs. In the star glow O'Connor saw his face grow suddenly haggard and tired-looking, and he leaned far in so that in both his own hands he held one of Kent's.

"I'm tiring you, Jimmy," he said huskily. "Good-by, old pal! I – I – " He hesitated and then lied steadily. "I'm going up to take a look around Kedsty's place. I won't be gone more than half an hour and will stop on my way back. If you're asleep – "

"I won't be asleep," said Kent.

O'Connor's hands gripped closer. "Good-by, Jimmy."

"Good-by." And then, as O'Connor stepped back into the night, Kent's voice called after him softly: "I'll be with you on the long trip, Bucky. Take care of yourself – always."

O'Connor's answer was a sob, a sob that rose in his throat like a great fist, and choked him, and filled his eyes with scalding tears that shut out the glow of moon and stars. And he did not go toward Kedsty's, but trudged heavily in the direction of the river, for he knew that Kent had called his lie, and that they had said their last farewell.

CHAPTER IV

It was a long time after O'Connor had gone before Kent at last fell asleep. It was a slumber weighted with the restlessness of a brain fighting to the last against exhaustion and the inevitable end. A strange spirit seemed whirling Kent back through the years he had lived, even to the days of his boyhood, leaping from crest to crest, giving to him swift and passing visions of valleys almost forgotten, of happenings and things long ago faded and indistinct in his memory. Vividly his dreams were filled with ghosts – ghosts that were transformed, as his spirit went back to them, until they were riotous with life and pulsating with the red blood of reality. He was a boy again, playing three-old-cat in front of the little old red brick schoolhouse half a mile from the farm where he was born, and where his mother had died.

And Skinny Hill, dead many years ago, was his partner at the bat – lovable Skinny, with his smirking grin and his breath that always smelled of the most delicious onions ever raised in Ohio. And then, at dinner hour, he was trading some of his mother's cucumber pickles for some of Skinny's onions – two onions for a pickle, and never a change in the price. And he played old-fashioned casino with his mother, and they were picking blackberries together in the woods, and he killed over again a snake that he had clubbed to death more than twenty years ago, while his mother ran away and screamed and then sat down and

cried.

He had worshiped that mother, and the spirit of his dreams did not let him look down into the valley where she lay dead, under a little white stone in the country cemetery a thousand miles away, with his father close beside her. But it gave him a passing thrill of the days in which he had fought his way through college – and then it brought him into the North, his beloved North.

For hours the wilderness was heavy about Kent. He moved restlessly, at times he seemed about to awaken, but always he slipped back into the slumberous arms of his forests. He was on the trail in the cold, gray beginning of Winter, and the glow of his campfire made a radiant patch of red glory in the heart of the night, and close to him in that glow sat O'Connor. He was behind dogs and sledge, fighting storm; dark and mysterious streams rippled under his canoe; he was on the Big River, O'Connor with him again – and then, suddenly, he was holding a blazing gun in his hand, and he and O'Connor stood with their backs to a rack, facing the bloodthirsty rage of McCaw and his free-traders. The roar of the guns half roused him, and after that came pleasanter things – the droning of wind in the spruce tops, the singing of swollen streams in Springtime, the songs of birds, the sweet smells of life, the glory of life as he had lived it, he and O'Connor. In the end, half between sleep and wakefulness, he was fighting a smothering pressure on his chest. It was an oppressive and torturing thing, like the tree that had fallen on him over in the Jackfish country, and he felt himself slipping off

into darkness. Suddenly there was a gleam of light. He opened his eyes. The sun was flooding in at his window, and the weight on his chest was the gentle pressure of Cardigan's stethoscope.

In spite of the physical stress of the phantoms which his mind has conceived, Kent awakened so quietly that Cardigan was not conscious of the fact until he raised his head. There was something in his face which he tried to conceal, but Kent caught it before it was gone. There were dark hollows under his eyes. He was a bit haggard, as though he had spent a sleepless night. Kent pulled himself up, squinting at the sun and grinning apologetically. He had slept well along into the day, and —

He caught himself with a sudden grimace of pain. A flash of something hot and burning swept through his chest. It was like a knife. He opened his mouth to breathe in the air. The pressure inside him was no longer the pressure of a stethoscope. It was real.

Cardigan, standing over him, was trying to look cheerful. "Too much of the night air, Kent," he explained. "That will pass away – soon."

It seemed to Kent that Cardigan gave an almost imperceptible emphasis to the word "soon," but he asked no question. He was quite sure that he understood, and he knew how unpleasant for Cardigan the answer to it would be. He fumbled under his pillow for his watch. It was nine o'clock. Cardigan was moving about uneasily, arranging the things on the table and adjusting the shade at the window. For a few moments, with his back to Kent, he

stood without moving. Then he turned, and said:

"Which will you have, Kent – a wash-up and breakfast, or a visitor?"

"I am not hungry, and I don't feel like soap and water just now. Who's the visitor? Father Layonne or – Kedsty?"

"Neither. It's a lady."

"Then I'd better have the soap and water! Do you mind telling me who it is?"

Cardigan shook his head. "I don't know. I've never seen her before. She came this morning while I was still in pajamas, and has been waiting ever since. I told her to come back again, but she insisted that she would remain until you were awake. She has been very patient for two hours."

A thrill which he made no effort to conceal leaped through Kent. "Is she a young woman?" he demanded eagerly. "Wonderful black hair, blue eyes, wears high-heeled shoes just about half as big as your hand – and very beautiful?"

"All of that," nodded Cardigan. "I even noticed the shoes, Jimmy. A very beautiful young woman!"

"Please let her come in," said Kent. "Mercer scrubbed me last night, and I feel fairly fit. She'll forgive this beard, and I'll apologize for your sake. What is her name?"

"I asked her, and she didn't seem to hear. A little later Mercer asked her, and he said she just looked at him for a moment and he froze. She is reading a volume of my Plutarch's 'Lives' – actually reading it. I know it by the way she turns the pages!"

Kent drew himself up higher against his pillows and faced the door when Cardigan went out. In a flash all that O'Connor had said swept back upon him – this girl, Kedsty, the mystery of it all. Why had she come to see him? What could be the motive of her visit – unless it was to thank him for the confession that had given Sandy McTrigger his freedom? O'Connor was right. She was deeply concerned in McTrigger and had come to express her gratitude. He listened. Distant footsteps sounded in the hall. They approached quickly and paused outside his door. A hand moved the latch, but for a moment the door did not open. He heard Cardigan's voice, then Cardigan's footsteps retreating down the hall. His heart thumped. He could not remember when he had been so upset over an unimportant thing.

CHAPTER V

The latch moved slowly, and with its movement came a gentle tap on the panel.

"Come in," he said.

The next instant he was staring. The girl had entered and closed the door behind her. O'Connor's picture stood in flesh and blood before him. The girl's eyes met his own. They were like glorious violets, as O'Connor had said, but they were not the eyes he had expected to see. They were the wide-open, curious eyes of a child. He had visualized them as pools of slumbering flame – the idea O'Connor had given him – and they were the opposite of that. Their one emotion seemed to be the emotion roused by an overwhelming, questioning curiosity. They were apparently not regarding him as a dying human being, but as a creature immensely interesting to look upon. In place of the gratitude he had anticipated, they were filled with a great, wondering interrogation, and there was not the slightest hint of embarrassment in their gaze. For a space it seemed to Kent that he saw nothing but those wonderful, dispassionate eyes looking at him. Then he saw the rest of her – her amazing hair, her pale, exquisite face, the slimness and beauty of her as she stood with her back to the door, one hand still resting on the latch. He had never seen anything quite like her. He might have guessed that she was eighteen, or twenty, or twenty-two. Her hair, wreathed

in shimmering, velvety coils from the back to the crown of her head, struck him as it had struck O'Connor, as unbelievable. The glory of it gave to her an appearance of height which she did not possess, for she was not tall, and her slimness added to the illusion.

And then, greatly to his embarrassment in the next instant, his eyes went to her feet. Again O'Connor was right – tiny feet, high-heeled pumps, ravishingly turned ankles showing under a skirt of some fluffy brown stuff or other —

Correcting himself, his face flushed red. The faintest tremble of a smile was on the girl's lips. She looked down, and for the first time he saw what O'Connor had seen, the sunlight kindling slumberous fires in her hair.

Kent tried to say something, but before he succeeded she had taken possession of the chair near his bedside.

"I have been waiting a long time to see you," she said. "You are James Kent, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Jim Kent. I'm sorry Dr. Cardigan kept you waiting. If I had known – "

He was getting a grip on himself again, and smiled at her. He noticed the amazing length of her dark lashes, but the violet eyes behind them did not smile back at him. The tranquillity of their gaze was disconcerting. It was as if she had not quite made up her mind about him yet and was still trying to classify him in the museum of things she had known.

"He should have awakened me," Kent went on, trying to keep

himself from slipping once more. "It isn't polite to keep a young lady waiting two hours!"

This time the blue eyes made him feel that his smile was a maudlin grin.

"Yes – you are different." She spoke softly, as if expressing the thought to herself. "That is what I came to find out, if you were different. You are dying?"

"My God – yes – I'm dying!" gasped Kent. "According to Dr. Cardigan I'm due to pop off this minute. Aren't you a little nervous, sitting so near to a man who's ready to explode while you're looking at him?"

For the first time the eyes changed. She was not facing the window, yet a glow like the glow of sunlight flashed into them, soft, luminous, almost laughing.

"No, it doesn't frighten me," she assured him. "I have always thought I should like to see a man die – not quickly, like drowning or being shot, but slowly, an inch at a time. But I shouldn't like to see YOU die."

"I'm glad," breathed Kent. "It's a great satisfaction to me."

"Yet I shouldn't be frightened if you did."

"Oh!"

Kent drew himself up straighter against his pillows. He had been a man of many adventures. He had faced almost every conceivable kind of shock. But this was a new one. He stared into the blue eyes, tongueless and mentally dazed. They were cool and sweet and not at all excited. And he knew that she spoke the truth.

Not by a quiver of those lovely lashes would she betray either fear or horror if he popped off right there. It was astonishing.

Something like resentment shot for an instant into his bewildered brain. Then it was gone, and in a flash it came upon him that she was but uttering his own philosophy of life, showing him life's cheapness, life's littleness, the absurdity of being distressed by looking upon the light as it flickered out. And she was doing it, not as a philosopher, but with the beautiful unconcern of a child.

Suddenly, as if impelled by an emotion in direct contradiction to her apparent lack of sympathy, she reached out a hand and placed it on Kent's forehead. It was another shock. It was not a professional touch, but a soft, cool little pressure that sent a comforting thrill through him. The hand was there for only a moment, and she withdrew it to entwine the slim fingers with those of the others in her lap.

"You have no fever," she said. "What makes you think you are dying?"

Kent explained what was happening inside him. He was completely shunted off his original track of thought and anticipation. He had expected to ask for at least a mutual introduction when his visitor came into his room, and had anticipated taking upon himself the position of a polite inquisitor. In spite of O'Connor, he had not thought she would be quite so pretty. He had not believed her eyes would be so beautiful, or their lashes so long, or the touch of her hand

so pleasantly unnerving. And now, in place of asking for her name and the reason for her visit, he became an irrational idiot, explaining to her certain matters of physiology that had to do with aortas and aneurismal sacs. He had finished before the absurdity of the situation dawned upon him, and with absurdity came the humor of it. Even dying, Kent could not fail to see the funny side of a thing It struck him as suddenly as had the girl's beauty and her bewildering and unaffected ingenuousness.

Looking at him, that same glow of mysterious questioning in her eyes, the girl found him suddenly laughing straight into her face.

"This is funny. It's very funny, Miss – Miss – "

"Marette," she supplied, answering his hesitation.

"It's funny, Miss Marette."

"Not Miss Marette. Just Marette," she corrected.

"I say, it's funny," he tried again. "You see, it's not so terribly pleasant as you might think to – er – be here, where I am, dying. And last night I thought about the finest thing in the world would be to have a woman beside me, a woman who'd be sort of sympathetic, you know, ease the thing off a little, maybe say she was sorry. And then the Lord answers my prayer, and *you* come – and you sort of give me the impression that you made the appointment with yourself to see how a fellow looks when he pops off."

The shimmer of light came into the blue eyes again. She seemed to have done with her mental analysis of him, and he saw

that a bit of color was creeping into her cheeks, pale when she had entered the room.

"You wouldn't be the first I've seen pop off," she assured him. "There have been a number, and I've never cried very much. I'd rather see a man die than some animals. But I shouldn't like to see YOU do it. Does that comfort you – like the woman you prayed the Lord for?"

"It does," gasped Kent. "But why the devil, Miss Marette – "

"Marette," she corrected again.

"Yes, Marette – why the devil have you come to see me at just the moment I'm due to explode? And what's your other name, and how old are you, and what do you want of me?"

"I haven't any other name, I'm twenty, and I came to get acquainted with you and see what you are like."

"Bully!" exclaimed Kent. "We're getting there fast! And now, why?"

The girl drew her chair a few inches nearer, and for a moment Kent thought that her lovely mouth was trembling on the edge of a smile.

"Because you have lied so splendidly to save another man who was about to die."

"*Et tu, Brute*!" sighed Kent, leaning back against his pillows. "Isn't it possible for a decent man to kill another man and not be called a liar when he tells about it? Why do so many believe that I lie?"

"They don't," said the girl. "They believe you – now. You

have gone so completely into the details of the murder in your confession that they are quite convinced. It would be too bad if you lived, for you surely would be hanged. Your lie sounds and reads like the truth. But I know it is a lie. You did not kill John Barkley."

"And the reason for your suspicion?"

For fully half a minute the girl's eyes rested on, his own. Again they seemed to be looking through him and into him. "Because I know the man who DID kill him," she said quietly, "and it was not you."

Kent made a mighty effort to appear calm. He reached for a cigar from the box that Cardigan had placed on his bed, and nibbled the end of it. "Has some one else been confessing?" he asked.

She shook her head the slightest bit.

"Did you – er – see this other gentleman kill John Barkley?" he insisted.

"No."

"Then I must answer you as I have answered at least one other. I killed John Barkley. If you suspect some other person, your suspicion is wrong."

"What a splendid liar!" she breathed softly. "Don't you believe in God?"

Kent winced. "In a large, embracing sense, yes," he said. "I believe in Him, for instance, as revealed to our senses in all that living, growing glory you see out there through the window

Nature and I have become pretty good pals, and you see I've sort of built up a mother goddess to worship instead of a he-god. Sacrilege, maybe, but it's a great comfort at times. But you didn't come to talk religion?"

The lovely head bent still nearer him. He felt an impelling desire to put up his hand and touch her shining hair, as she laid her hand on his forehead.

"I know who killed John Barkley," she insisted. "I know how and when and why he was killed. Please tell me the truth. I want to know. Why did you confess to a crime which you did not commit?"

Kent took time to light his cigar. The girl watched him closely, almost eagerly.

"I may be mad," he said. "It is possible for any human being to be mad and not know it. That's the funny part about insanity. But if I'm not insane, I killed Barkley; if I didn't kill him, I must be insane, for I'm very well convinced that I did. Either that, or you are insane. I have my suspicions that you are. Would a sane person wear pumps with heels like those up here?" He pointed accusingly to the floor.

For the first time the girl smiled, openly, frankly, gloriously. It was as if her heart had leaped forth for an instant and had greeted him. And then, like sunlight shadowed by cloud, the smile was gone. "You are a brave man," she said. "You are splendid. I hate men. But I think if you lived very long, I should love you. I will believe that you killed Barkley. You compel me to believe it.

You confessed, when you found you were going to die, that an innocent man might be saved. Wasn't that it?"

Kent nodded weakly. "That's it. I hate to think of it that way, but I guess it's true. I confessed because I knew I was going to die. Otherwise I am quite sure that I should have let the other fellow take my medicine for me. You must think I am a beast."

"All men are beasts," she agreed quickly. "But you are – a different kind of beast. I like you. If there were a chance, I might fight for you. I can fight." She held up her two small hands, half smiling at him again.

"But not with those," he exclaimed. "I think you would fight with your eyes. O'Connor told me they half killed Kedsty when you met them in the poplar grove yesterday."

He had expected that the mention of Inspector Kedsty's name would disturb her. It had no effect that he could perceive.

"O'Connor was the big, red-faced man with Mr. Kedsty?"

"Yes, my trail partner. He came to me yesterday and raved about your eyes. They ARE beautiful; I've never seen eyes half so lovely. But that wasn't what struck Bucky so hard. It was the effect they had on Kedsty. He said they shattered every nerve in Kedsty's body, and Kedsty isn't the sort to get easily frightened. And the queer part of it was that the instant you had gone, he gave O'Connor an order to free McTrigger – and then turned and followed you. All the rest of that day O'Connor tried to discover something about you at the Landing. He couldn't find hide nor hair – I beg pardon! – I mean he couldn't find out anything

about you at all. We made up our minds that for some reason or other you were hiding up at Kedsty's bungalow. You don't mind a fellow saying all this – when he is going to pop off soon – do you?"

He was half frightened at the directness with which he had expressed the thing. He would gladly have buried his own curiosity and all of O'Connor's suspicions for another moment of her hand on his forehead. But it was out, and he waited.

She was looking down, her fingers twisting some sort of tasseled dress ornament in her lap, and Kent mentally measured the length of her lashes with a foot rule in mind. They were superb, and in the thrill of his admiration he would have sworn they were an inch long. She looked up suddenly and caught the glow in his eyes and the flush that lay under the tan of his cheeks. Her own color had deepened a little.

"What if you shouldn't die?" she asked him bluntly, as if she had not heard a word of all he had said about Kedsty. "What would you do?"

"I'm going to."

"But if you shouldn't?"

Kent shrugged his shoulders. "I suppose I'd have to take my medicine. You're not going?"

She had straightened up and was sitting on the edge of her chair. "Yes, I'm going. I'm afraid of my eyes. I may look at you as I looked at Mr. Kedsty, and then – pop you'd go, quick! And I don't want to be here when you die!"

He heard a soft little note of laughter in her throat. It sent a chill through him. What an adorable, blood-thirsty little wretch she was! He stared at her bent head, at the shining coils of her wonderful hair. Undone, he could see it completely hiding her. And it was so soft and warm that again he was tempted to reach out and touch it. She was wonderful, and yet it was not possible that she had a heart. Her apparent disregard of the fact that he was a dying man was almost diabolic. There was no sympathy in the expression of her violet eyes as she looked at him. She was even making fun of the fact that he was about to die!

She stood up, surveying for the first time the room in which she had been sitting. Then she turned to the window and looked out. She reminded Kent of a beautiful young willow that had grown at the edge of a stream, exquisite, slender, strong. He could have picked her up in his arms as easily as a child, yet he sensed in the lithe beauty of her body forces that could endure magnificently. The careless poise of her head fascinated him. For that head and the hair that crowned it he knew that half the women of the earth would have traded precious years of their lives.

And then, without turning toward him, she said, "Some day, when I die, I wish I might have as pleasant a room as this."

"I hope you never die," he replied devoutly.

She came back and stood for a moment beside him.

"I have had a very pleasant time," she said, as though he had given her a special sort of entertainment. "It's too bad you are

going to die. I'm sure we should have been good friends. Aren't you?"

"Yes, very sure. If you had only arrived sooner – "

"And I shall always think of you as a different kind of man-beast," she interrupted him. "It is really true that I shouldn't like to see you die. I want to get away before it happens. Would you care to have me kiss you?"

For an instant Kent felt that his aorta was about to give away. "I – I would," he gasped huskily.

"Then – close your eyes, please."

He obeyed. She bent over him. He felt the soft touch of her hands and caught for an instant the perfume of her face and hair, and then the thrill of her lips pressed warm and soft upon his.

She was not flushed or embarrassed when he looked at her again. It was as if she had kissed a baby and was wondering at its red face. "I've only kissed three men before you," she avowed. "It is strange. I never thought I should do it again. And now, good-by!" She moved quickly to the door.

"Wait," he cried plaintively. "Please wait. I want to know your name. It is Marette – "

"Radisson," she finished for him. "Marette Radisson, and I come from away off there, from a place we call the Valley of Silent Men." She was pointing into the north.

"The North!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is far north. Very far."

Her hand was on the latch. The door opened slowly.

"Wait," he pleaded again. "You must not go."

"Yes, I must go. I have remained too long. I am sorry I kissed you. I shouldn't have done that. But I had to because you are such a splendid liar!"

The door opened quickly and closed behind her. He heard her steps almost running down the hall, where not long ago he had listened to the last of O'Connor's.

And then there was silence, and in that silence he heard her words again, drumming like little hammers in his head, *Because you are such a splendid liar*!"

CHAPTER VI

James Kent, among his other qualities good and bad, possessed a merciless opinion of his own shortcomings, but never, in that opinion, had he fallen so low as in the interval which immediately followed the closing of his door behind the mysterious girl who had told him that her name was Marette Radisson. No sooner was she gone than the overwhelming superiority of her childlike cleverness smote him until, ashamed of himself, he burned red in his aloneness.

He, Sergeant Kent, the coolest man on the force next to Inspector Kedsty, the most dreaded of catechists when questioning criminals, the man who had won the reputation of facing quietly and with deadly sureness the most menacing of dangers, had been beaten – horribly beaten – by a girl! And yet, in defeat, an irrepressible and at times distorted sense of humor made him give credit to the victor. The shame of the thing was his acknowledgment that a bit of feminine beauty had done the trick. He had made fun of O'Connor when the big staff-sergeant had described the effect of the girl's eyes on Inspector Kedsty. And, now, if O'Connor could know of what had happened here —

And then, like a rubber ball, that saving sense of humor bounced up out of the mess, and Kent found himself chuckling as his face grew cooler. His visitor had come, and she had gone,

and he knew no more about her than when she had entered his room, except that her very pretty name was Marette Radisson. He was just beginning to think of the questions he had wanted to ask, a dozen, half a hundred of them – more definitely who she was; how and why she had come to Athabasca Landing; her interest in Sandy McTrigger; the mysterious relationship that must surely exist between her and Inspector Kedsty; and, chiefly, her real motive in coming to him when she knew that he was dying. He comforted himself by the assurance that he would have learned these things had she not left him so suddenly. He had not expected that.

The question which seated itself most insistently in his mind was, why had she come? Was it, after all, merely a matter of curiosity? Was her relationship to Sandy McTrigger such that inquisitiveness alone had brought her to see the man who had saved him? Surely she had not been urged by a sense of gratitude, for in no way had she given expression to that. On his death-bed she had almost made fun of him. And she could not have come as a messenger from McTrigger, or she would have left her message. For the first time he began to doubt that she knew the man at all, in spite of the strange thing that had happened under O'Connor's eyes. But she must know Kedsty. She had made no answer to his half-accusation that she was hiding up at the Inspector's bungalow. He had used that word – "hiding." It should have had an effect. And she was as beautifully unconscious of it as though she had not heard him, and he knew that she had

heard him very distinctly. It was then that she had given him that splendid view of her amazingly long lashes and had countered softly,

"What if you shouldn't die?"

Kent felt himself suddenly aglow with an irresistible appreciation of the genius of her subtlety, and with that appreciation came a thrill of deeper understanding. He believed that he knew why she had left him so suddenly. It was because she had seen herself close to the danger-line. There were things which she did not want him to know or question her about, and his daring intimation that she was hiding in Kedsty's bungalow had warned her. Was it possible that Kedsty himself had sent her for some reason which he could not even guess at? Positively it was not because of McTrigger, the man he had saved. At least she would have thanked him in some way. She would not have appeared quite so adorably cold-blooded, quite so sweetly unconscious of the fact that he was dying. If McTrigger's freedom had meant anything to her, she could not have done less than reveal to him a bit of sympathy. And her greatest compliment, if he excepted the kiss, was that she had called him a splendid liar!

Kent grimaced and drew in a deep breath because of the tightness in his chest. Why was it that every one seemed to disbelieve him? Why was it that even this mysterious girl, whom he had never seen before in his life, politely called him a liar when he insisted that he had killed John Barkley? Was the fact

of murder necessarily branded in one's face? If so, he had never observed it. Some of the hardest criminals he had brought in from the down-river country were likable-looking men. There was Horrigan, for instance, who for seven long weeks kept him in good humor with his drollery, though he was bringing him in to be hanged. And there were McTab, and *le Bête Noir*– the Black Beast – a lovable vagabond in spite of his record, and Le Beau, the gentlemanly robber of the wilderness mail, and half a dozen others he could recall without any effort at all. No one called them liars when, like real men, they confessed their crimes when they saw their game was up. To a man they had given up the ghost with their boots on, and Kent respected their memory because of it. And he was dying – and even this stranger girl called him a liar? And no case had ever been more complete than his own. He had gone mercilessly into the condemning detail of it all. It was down in black and white. He had signed it. And still he was disbelieved. It was funny, deuced funny, thought Kent.

Until young Mercer opened the door and came in with his late breakfast, he had forgotten that he had really been hungry when he awakened with Cardigan's stethoscope at his chest. Mercer had amused him from the first. The pink-faced young Englishman, fresh from the old country, could not conceal in his face and attitude the fact that he was walking in the presence of the gallows whenever he entered the room. He was, as he had confided in Cardigan, "beastly hit up" over the thing. To feed and wash a man who would undoubtedly die, but who would be

hanged by the neck until he was dead if he lived, filled him with peculiar and at times conspicuous emotions. It was like attending to a living corpse, if such a thing could be conceived. And Mercer had conceived it. Kent had come to regard him as more or less of a barometer giving away Cardigan's secrets. He had not told Cardigan, but had kept the discovery for his own amusement.

This morning Mercer's face was less pink, and his pale eyes were paler, Kent thought. Also he started to sprinkle sugar on his eggs in place of salt.

Kent laughed and stopped his hand. "You may sugar my eggs when I'm dead, Mercer," he said, "but while I'm alive I want salt on 'em! Do you know, old man, you look bad this morning. Is it because this is my last breakfast?"

"I hope not, sir, I hope not," replied Mercer quickly. "Indeed, I hope you are going to live, sir."

"Thanks!" said Kent dryly. "Where is Cardigan?"

"The Inspector sent a messenger for him, sir. I think he has gone to see him. Are your eggs properly done, sir?"

"Mercer, if you ever worked in a butler's pantry, for the love of heaven forget it now!" exploded Kent, "I want you to tell me something straight out. How long have I got?"

Mercer fidgeted for a moment, and a shade or two more of the red went out of his face. "I can't say, sir. Doctor Cardigan hasn't told me. But I think not very long, sir. Doctor Cardigan is cut up all in rags this morning. And Father Layonne is coming to see you at any moment."

"Much obliged," nodded Kent, calmly beginning his second egg. "And, by the way, what did you think of the young lady?"

"Ripping, positively ripping!" exclaimed Mercer.

"That's the word," agreed Kent. "Ripping. It sounds like the calico counter in a dry-goods store, but means a lot. Don't happen to know where she is staying or why she is at the Landing, do you?"

He knew that he was asking a foolish question and scarcely expected an answer from Mercer. He was astonished when the other said:

"I heard Doctor Cardigan ask her if we might expect her to honor us with another visit, and she told him it would be impossible, because she was leaving on a down-river scow tonight. Fort Simpson, I think she said she was going to, sir."

"The deuce you say!" cried Kent, spilling a bit of his coffee in the thrill of the moment. "Why, that's where Staff-Sergeant O'Connor is bound for!"

"So I heard Doctor Cardigan tell her. But she didn't reply to that. She just – went. If you don't mind a little joke in your present condition, sir, I might say that Doctor Cardigan was considerably flayed up over her. A deuced pretty girl, sir, deuced pretty! And I think he was shot through!"

"Now you're human, Mercer. She was pretty, wasn't she?"

"Er – yes – stunningly so, Mr. Kent," agreed Mercer, reddening suddenly to the roots of his pasty, blond hair. "I don't mind confessing that in this unusual place her appearance was

quite upsetting."

"I agree with you, friend Mercer," nodded Kent. "She upset me. And – see here, old man! – will you do a dying man the biggest favor he ever asked in his life?"

"I should be most happy, sir, most happy."

"It's this," said Kent. "I want to know if that girl actually leaves on the down-river scow tonight. If I'm alive tomorrow morning, will you tell me?"

"I shall do my best, sir."

"Good. It's simply the silly whim of a dying man, Mercer. But I want to be humored in it. And I'm sensitive – like yourself. I don't want Cardigan to know. There's an old Indian named Mooie, who lives in a shack just beyond the sawmill. Give him ten dollars and tell him there is another ten in it if he sees the business through, and reports properly to you, and keeps his mouth shut afterward. Here – the money is under my pillow."

Kent pulled out a wallet and put fifty dollars in Mercer's hands.

"Buy cigars with the rest of it, old man. It's of no more use to me. And this little trick you are going to pull off is worth it. It's my last fling on earth, you might say."

"Thank you, sir. It is very kind of you."

Mercer belonged to a class of wandering Englishmen typical of the Canadian West, the sort that sometimes made real Canadians wonder why a big and glorious country like their own should cling to the mother country. Ingratiating and obsequiously

polite at all times, he gave one the impression of having had splendid training as a servant, yet had this intimation been made to him, he would have become highly indignant. Kent had learned their ways pretty well. He had met them in all sorts of places, for one of their inexplicable characteristics was the recklessness and apparent lack of judgment with which they located themselves. Mercer, for instance, should have held a petty clerical job of some kind in a city, and here he was acting as nurse in the heart of a wilderness!

After Mercer had gone with the breakfast things and the money, Kent recalled a number of his species. And he knew that under their veneer of apparent servility was a thing of courage and daring which needed only the right kind of incentive to rouse it. And when roused, it was peculiarly efficient in a secretive, artful-dodger sort of way. It would not stand up before a gun. But it would creep under the mouths of guns on a black night. And Kent was positive his fifty dollars would bring him results – if he lived.

Just why he wanted the information he was after, he could not have told himself. It was a pet aphorism between O'Connor and him that they had often traveled to success on the backs of their hunches. And his proposition to Mercer was made on the spur of one of those moments when the spirit of a hunch possessed him. His morning had been one of unexpected excitement, and now he leaned back in an effort to review it and to forget, if he could, the distressing thing that was bound to happen to him within the

next few hours. But he could not get away from the thickening in his chest. It seemed growing on him. Now and then he was compelled to make quite an effort to get sufficient air into his lungs.

He found himself wondering if there was a possibility that the girl might return. For a long time he lay thinking about her, and it struck him as incongruous and in bad taste that fate should have left this adventure for his last. If he had met her six months ago – or even three – it was probable that she would so have changed the events of life for him that he would not have got the half-breed's bullet in his chest. He confessed the thing unblushingly. The wilderness had taken the place of woman for him. It had claimed him, body and soul. He had desired nothing beyond its wild freedom and its never-ending games of chance. He had dreamed, as every man dreams, but realities and not the dreams had been the red pulse of his life. And yet, if this girl had come sooner —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.