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GOD'S COUNTRY *and the* WOMAN

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

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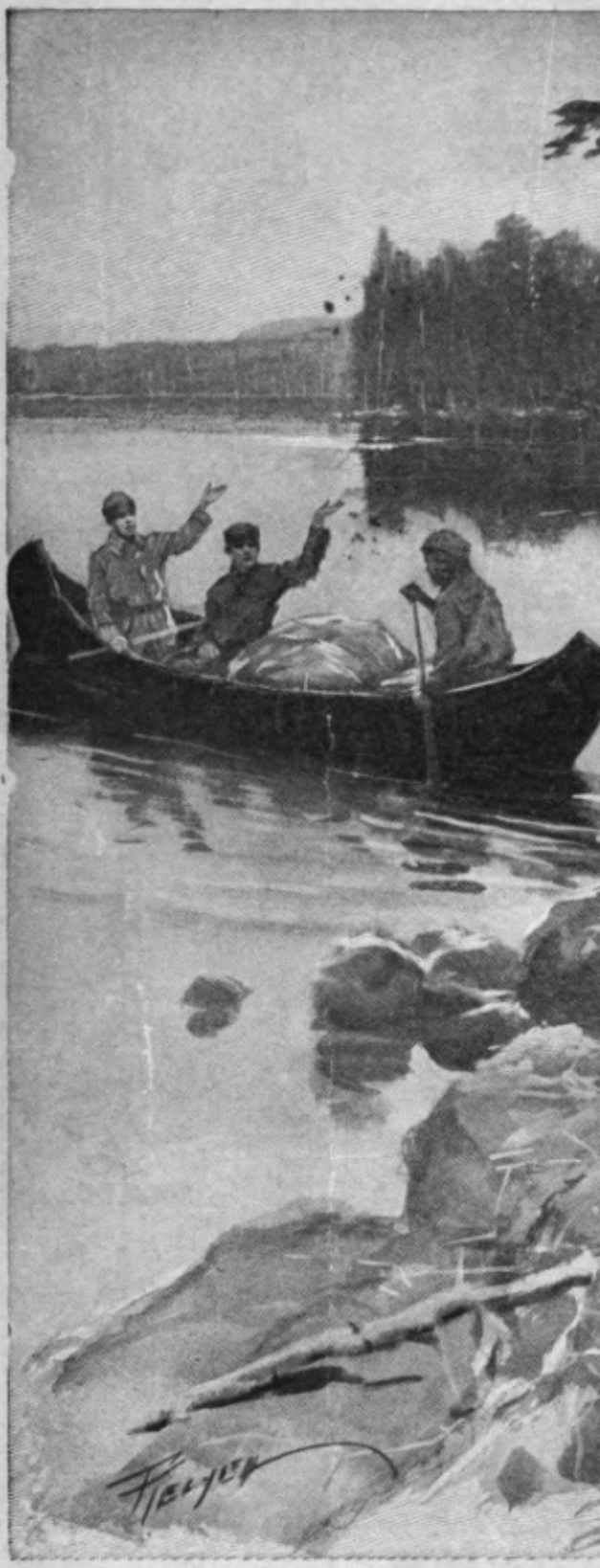
and one half on a two-acre plot. He



The canoe sped out into the

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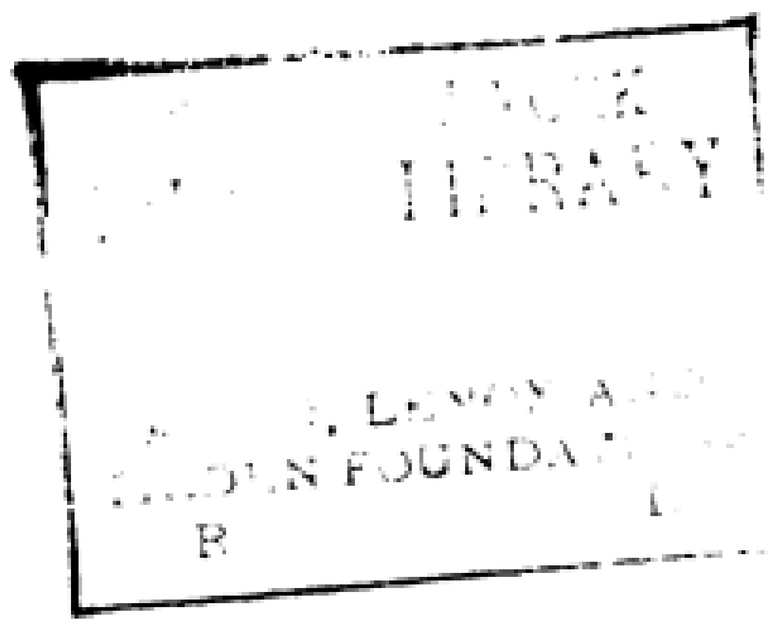

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They were her slaves! What need had she of his protection?

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GOD'S COUNTRY— AND THE WOMAN

BY

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

1.50

Illustrated

By WILLIAM OBERHARDT
AND NORMAN BORCHARDT

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1915

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ILLUSTRATIONS

They were her slaves! What need had she of his protection? . . . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"And when you have done this you would be willing to go away, to promise never to see me again, to ask no reward?" 20

"To-night, my Josephine—just this night—may I wish you all the hope and happiness that God can bring you, and kiss you—once——" . . . 80

"You understand now. You know why—some day—you must go away and never come back". 120

They went down free of the dogs, the forest man under 146

"He believes in us," he repeated. "And you, Josephine, you love me?" 184

Not twenty paces from him he heard voices. He dodged behind a tree, and an instant later two figures hurried past him 240

He saw the club over him, a short, thick club, in the hand of Thoreau himself 300

For a moment John Adare stood like an avenging demon in the midst of the startled faces of the forest men 320

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dog's sullen growl and the low rumble of distant thunder. It made him cough. And then he laughed again, scanning the narrowing sweep of the lake ahead of him.

He felt like a boy, and he chuckled as he thought of the definite reason for it. For twenty-three months he had been like a piece of rubber stretched to a tension—sometimes almost to the snapping point. Now had come the reaction, and he was going *home*. Home! It was that one word that caused a shadow to flit over his face, and only once or twice had he forgotten and let it slip between his lips. At least he was returning to civilization—getting *away* from the everlasting drone of breaking ice and the clack-clack tongue of the Eskimo.

With the stub of a pencil Philip had figured out on a bit of paper about where he was that morning. The whalebone hut of his last Arctic camp was eight hundred miles due north. Fort Churchill, over on Hudson's Bay, was four hundred miles to the east, and Fort Resolution, on the Great Slave, was four hundred miles to the west. On his map he had drawn a heavy circle about Prince Albert, six hundred miles to the south. That was the nearest line of rail. Six days back Radisson had died after a month's struggle

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with that terrible thing they called "*le mort rouge*," or the Red Death. Since then Philip had pointed his canoe straight *up* the Dubawnt waterways, and was a hundred and twenty miles nearer to civilization. He had been through these waterways twice before, and he knew that there was not a white man within a hundred and fifty miles of him. And as for a white woman——

Weyman stopped his paddling where there was no current, and leaned back in his canoe for a breathing space, and to fill his pipe. A WHITE WOMAN! Would he stare at her like a fool when he saw her again for the first time? Eighteen months ago he had seen a white woman over at Fort Churchill—the English clerk's wife, thirty, with a sprinkle of gray in her blond hair, and pale blue eyes. Fresh from the Garden of Eden, he had wondered why the half-dozen white men over there regarded her as they did. Long ago, in the maddening gloom of the Arctic night, he had learned to understand. At Fond du Lac, when Weyman had first come up into the forest country, he had said to the factor: "It's glorious! It's God's Country!" And the factor had turned his tired, empty eyes upon him with the words: "It was—before *she* went. But no country is God's

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Country without a woman," and then he took Philip to the lonely grave under a huge lob-stick spruce, and told him in a few words how one woman had made life for him. Even then Philip could not fully understand. But he did now.

He resumed his paddling, his gray eyes alert. His aloneness and the bigness of the world in which, so far as he knew, he was the only human atom, did not weigh heavily upon him. He loved this bigness and emptiness and the glory of solitude. It was middle autumn, and close to noon of a day unmarred by cloud above, and warm with sunlight. He was following close to the west shore of the lake. The opposite shore was a mile away. He was so near to the rock-lined beach that he could hear the soft throat-cries of the moose-birds. And what he saw, so far as his eyes could see in all directions, was "God's Country"—a glory of colour that was like a great master painting. The birch had turned to red and gold. From out of the rocks rose trees that were great crimson splashes of mountain-ash berries framed against the dark lustre of balsam and cedar and spruce.

Without reason, Philip was listening again to the quiet lifeless words of Jasper, the factor over at Fond

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du Lac, as he described the day when he and his young wife first came up through the wonderland of the North. "No country is God's Country without a woman!" He found the words running in an unpleasant monotone through his brain. He had made up his mind that he would strike Fond du Lac on his way down, for Jasper's words and the hopeless picture he had made that day beside the little cross under the spruce had made them brothers in a strange sort of way. Besides, Jasper would furnish him with a couple of Indians, and a sledge and dogs if the snows came early.

In a break between the rocks Philip saw a white strip of sand, and turned his canoe in to shore. He had been paddling since five o'clock, and in the six hours had made eighteen miles. Yet he felt no fatigue as he stood up and stretched himself. He remembered how different it had been four years ago when Hill, the Hudson's Bay Company's man down at Prince Albert, had looked him over with skeptical and uneasy eyes, encouraging him with the words: "You're going to a funeral, young man, and it's your own. You won't make God's House, much less Hudson's Bay!"

Weyman laughed joyously.

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"Fooled 'em—fooled 'em all!" he told himself. "We'll wager a dollar to a doughnut that we're the toughest looking specimen that ever drifted down from Coronation Gulf, or any other gulf. *A doughnut!* I'd trade a gold nugget as big as my fist for a doughnut or a piece of pie right this minute. Doughnuts an' pie—real old pumpkin pie—an' cranberry sauce, 'n' *potatoes!* Good Lord, and they're only six hundred miles away, carloads of 'em!"

He began to whistle as he pulled his rubber dunnage sack out of the canoe. Suddenly he stopped, his eyes staring at the smooth white floor of sand. A bear had been there before him, and quite recently. Weyman had killed fresh meat the day before, but the instinct of the naturalist and the woodsman kept him from singing or whistling, two things which he was very much inclined to do on this particular day. He had no suspicion that a bear which he was destined never to see had become the greatest factor in his life. He was philosopher enough to appreciate the value and importance of little things, but the bear track did not keep him silent because he regarded it as significant, because he wanted to kill. He would have welcomed it to dinner, and would have talked to it were it as affable and good-mannered as

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the big pop-eyed moose-birds that were already flirting about near him.

He emptied a half of the contents of the rubber sack out on the sand and made a selection for dinner, and he chuckled in his big happiness as he saw how attenuated his list of supplies was becoming. There was still a quarter of a pound of tea, no sugar, no coffee, half a dozen pounds of flour, twenty-seven prunes jealously guarded in a piece of narwhal skin, a little salt and pepper mixed, and fresh caribou meat.

"It's a lovely day, and we'll have a treat for dinner," he informed himself. "No need of starving. We'll have a real feast. I'll cook *seven* prunes instead of five!"

He built a small fire, hung two small pots over it, selected his prunes, and measured out a tablespoonful of black tea. In the respite he had while the water heated he dug a small mirror out of the sack and looked at himself. His long, untrimmed hair was blond, and the inch of stubble on his face was brick red. There were tiny creases at the corners of his eyes, caused by the blistering sleet and cold wind of the Arctic coast. He grimaced as he studied himself. Then his face lighted up with sudden inspiration.

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"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "I need a shave! We'll use the prune water."

From the rubber bag he fished out his razor, a nubbin of soap, and a towel. For fifteen minutes after that he sat cross-legged on the sand, with the mirror on a rock, and worked. When he had finished he inspected himself closely.

"You're not half bad," he concluded, and he spoke seriously now. "Four years ago when you started up here you were thirty—and you looked forty. Now you're thirty-four, and if it wasn't for the snow lines in your eyes I'd say you were a day or two younger. That's pretty good."

He had washed his face and was drying it with the towel when a sound made him look over beyond the rocks. It was the crackling sound made by a dead stick stepped upon, or a sapling broken down. Either meant the bear.

Dropping the towel, he unbuttoned the flap to the holster of his revolver, took a peep to see how long he could leave the water before it would boil, and stepped cautiously in the direction of the sound. A dozen paces beyond the bulwark of rocks he came upon a fairly well-worn moose trail; surveying its direction from the top of a boulder, he made up his mind that

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the bear was dining on mountain-ash berries where he saw one of the huge crimson splashes of the fruit a hundred yards away.

He went on quietly. Under the big ash tree there was no sign of a feast, recent or old. He proceeded, the trail turning almost at right angles from the ash tree, as if about to bury itself in the deeper forest. His exploratory instinct led him on for another hundred yards, when the trail swung once more to the left. He heard the swift trickling run of water among rocks, and again a sound. But his mind did not associate the sound which he heard this time with the one made by the bear. It was not the breaking of a stick ,or the snapping of brush. It was more a part of the musical water-sound itself, a strange key struck once to interrupt the monotone of a rushing stream.

Over a gray hog-back of limestone Philip climbed to look down into a little valley of smooth-washed boulders and age-crumbled rock through which the stream picked its way. He descended to the white margin of sand and turned sharply to the right, where a little pool had formed at the base of a huge rock. And there he stopped, his heart in his throat, every fibre in his body charged with a sudden electrical

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thrill at what he beheld. For a moment he was powerless to move. He stood—and stared.

At the edge of the pool twenty steps from him was kneeling a woman. Her back was toward him, and in that moment she was as motionless as the rock that towered over her. Along with the rippling drone of the stream, without reason on his part—without time for thought—there leaped through his amazed brain the words of Jasper, the factor, and he knew that he was looking upon the miracle that makes "God's Country"—a white woman!

The sun shone down upon her bare head. Over her slightly bent shoulders swept a glory of unbound hair that rippled to the sand. Black tresses, even velvety as the crow's wing, might have meant Cree or half-breed. But this at which he stared—all that he saw of her—was the brown and gold of the autumnal tintings that had painted pictures for him that day.

Slowly she raised her head, as if something had given her warning of a presence behind, and as she hesitated in that birdlike, listening poise a breath of wind from the little valley stirred her hair in a shimmering veil that caught a hundred fires of the sun. And then, as he crushed back his first impulse to cry out, to speak to her, she rose erect beside the pool,

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her back still to him, and hidden to the hips in her glorious hair.

Her movement revealed a towel partly spread out on the sand, and a comb, a brush, and a small toilet bag. Philip did not see these. She was turning, slowly, scanning the rocks beyond the valley.

Like a thing carven out of stone he stood, still speechless, still staring, when she faced him.

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CHAPTER TWO

A FACE like that into which Philip looked might have come to him from out of some dream of paradise. It was a girl's face. Eyes of the pure blue of the sky above met his own. Her lips were a little parted and a little laughing. Before he had uttered a word, before he could rise out of the stupidity of his wonder, the change came. A fear that he could not have forgotten if he had lived through a dozen centuries leaped into the lovely eyes. The half-laughing lips grew tense with terror. Quick as the flash of powder there had come into her face a look that was not that of one merely startled. It was fear—horror—a great, gripping thing that for an instant seemed to crush the life from her soul. In another moment it was gone, and she swayed back against the face of the rock, clutching a hand at her breast.

"My God, how I frightened you!" gasped Philip.

"Yes, you frightened me," she said.

Her white throat was bare, and he could see the throb of it as she made a strong effort to speak

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steadily. Her eyes did not leave him. As he advanced a step he saw that unconsciously she cringed closer to the rock.

"You are not afraid—now?" he asked. "I wouldn't have frightened you for the world. And sooner than hurt you I'd—I'd kill myself. I just stumbled here by accident. And I haven't seen a white woman—for two years. So I stared—stared—and stood there like a fool."

Relief shot into her eyes at his words.

"Two years? What do you mean?"

"I've been up along the rim of h—— I mean the Arctic, on a government wild-goose chase," he explained. "And I'm just coming down."

"You're from the North?"

There was an eager emphasis in her question.

"Yes. Straight from Coronation Gulf. I ran ashore to cook a mess of prunes. While the water was boiling I came down here after a bear, and found *you!* My name is Philip Weyman; I haven't even an Indian with me, and there are three things in the world I'd trade that name for just now: One is pie, another is doughnuts, and the third——"

She brushed back her hair, and the fear went from her eyes as she looked at him.

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"And the third?" she asked.

"Is the answer to a question," he finished. "How do *you* happen to be here, six hundred miles from anywhere?"

She stepped out from the rock. And now he saw that she was almost as tall as himself, and that she was as slim as a reed and as beautifully poised as the wild narcissus that sways like music to every call of the wind. She had tucked up her sleeves, baring her round white arms close to the shoulders, and as she looked steadily at him before answering his question she flung back the shining masses of her hair and began to braid it. Her fear for him was entirely gone. She was calm. And there was something in the manner of her quiet and soul-deep study of him that held back other words which he might have spoken.

In those few moments she had taken her place in his life. She stood before him like a goddess, tall and slender and unafraid, her head a gold-brown aureole, her face filled with a purity, a beauty, and a *strength* that made him look at her speechless, waiting for the sound of her voice. In her look there was neither boldness nor suspicion. Her eyes were clear, deep pools of velvety blue that defied him to lie to her.

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He felt that under those eyes he could have knelt down upon the sand and emptied his soul of its secrets for their inspection.

"It is not very strange that I should be here," she said at last. "I have always lived here. It is my home."

"Yes, I believe that," breathed Philip. "It is the last thing in the world that one *would* believe—but I do; I believe it. Something—I don't know what—told me that you belonged to this world as you stood there beside the rock. But I don't understand. A thousand miles from a city—and *you!* It's unreal. It's almost like the dreams I've been dreaming during the past eighteen months, and the visions I've seen during that long, maddening night up on the coast, when for five months we didn't see a glow of the sun. But—you understand—it's hard to comprehend."

From her he glanced swiftly over the rocks of the coulee, as if expecting to see some sign of the home she had spoken of, or at least of some other human presence. She understood his questioning look.

"I am alone," she said.

The quality of her voice startled him more then her words. There was a deeper, darker glow in her

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eyes as she watched their effect upon him. She swept out a gleaming white arm, still moist with the water of the pool, taking in the wide, autumn-tinted spaces about them.

"I am alone," she repeated, still keeping her eyes on his face. "Entirely alone. That is why you startled me—why I was afraid. This is my hiding-place, and I thought——"

He saw that she had spoken words that she would have recalled. She hesitated. Her lips trembled. In that moment of suspense a little gray ermine dislodged a stone from the rock ridge above them, and at the sound of it as it struck behind her the girl gave a start, and a quick flash of the old fear leaped for an instant into her face. And now Philip beheld something in her which he had been too bewildered and wonder-struck to observe before. Her first terror had been so acute that he had failed to see what remained after her fright had passed. But it was clear to him now, and the look that came into his own face told her that he had made the discovery.

The beauty of her face, her eyes, her hair—the wonder of her presence six hundred miles from civilization—had held him spellbound. He had seen only the deep lustre and the wonderful blue of her eyes.

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Now he saw that those eyes, exquisite in their loveliness, were haunted by something which she was struggling to fight back—a questing, hunted look that burned there steadily, and of which he was not the cause. A deep-seated grief, a terror far back, shone through the forced calmness with which she was speaking to him. He knew that she was fighting with herself, that the nervously twitching fingers at her breast told more than her lips had confessed. He stepped nearer to her and held out a hand, and when he spoke his voice was vibrant with the thing that made men respect him and women have faith in him.

"Tell me—what you started to say," he entreated quietly. "This is your hiding-place, and you thought—what? I think that I can guess. You thought that I was some one else, whom you have reason to fear."

She did not answer. It was as if she had not yet completely measured him. Her eyes told him that. They were not looking *at* him, but *into* him. And they were softly beautiful as wood violets. He found himself looking steadily into them—close, so close that he could have reached out and touched her. Slowly there came over them a filmy softness. And

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then, marvellously, he saw the tears gathering, as dew might gather over the sweet petals of a flower. And still for a moment she did not speak. There came a little quiver at her throat, and she caught herself with a quick, soft breath.

"Yes, I thought you were some one else—whom I fear," she said then. "But why should I tell you? You are from down there, from what you please to call civilization. I should distrust you because of that. So why—why should I tell you?"

In an instant Philip was at her side. In his rough, storm-beaten hand he caught the white fingers that trembled at her breast. And there was something about him now that made her completely unafraid.

"Why?" he asked. "Listen, and I will tell you. Four years ago I came up into this country from down there—the world they call Civilization. I came up with every ideal and every dream I ever had broken and crushed. And up here I found God's Country. I found new ideals and new dreams. I am going back with them. But they can never be broken as the others were—because—now—I have found something that will make them live. And that something is *you!* Don't let my words startle you. I mean them to be as pure as the sun that

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"And when you have done this you would be willing to go away, to promise never to see me again, to ask no reward?"

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shines over our heads. If I leave you now—if I never see you again—you will have filled this wonderful world for me. And if I could do something to prove this—to make you happier—why, I'd thank God for having sent me ashore to cook a mess of prunes."

He released her hand, and stepped back from her.

"That is why you should tell me," he finished.

A swift change had come into her eyes and face. She was breathing quickly. He saw the sudden throbbing of her throat. A flush of colour had mounted into her cheeks. Her lips were parted, her eyes shone like stars.

"You would do a great deal for me?" she questioned breathlessly. "A great deal—and like—*a man?*"

"Yes."

"*A man*—one of God's men?" she repeated.

He bowed his head.

Slowly, so slowly that she scarcely seemed to move, she drew nearer to him.

"And when you had done this you would be willing to go away, to promise never to see me again, to ask no reward? You would swear that?"

Her hand touched his arm. Her breath came tense and fast as she waited for him to answer.

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"If you wished it, yes," he said.

"I almost believe," he heard, as if she were speaking the words to herself. She turned to him again, and something of faith, of hope transfigured her face.

"Return to your fire and your prunes," she said quickly, and the sunlight of a smile passed over her lips. "Then, half an hour from now, come up the coulee to the turn in the rocks. You will find me there."

She bent quickly and picked up the little bag and the brush from the sand. Without looking at him again she sped swiftly beyond the big rock, and Philip's last vision of her was the radiant glory of her hair as it rippled cloudlike behind her in the sunlight.

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CHAPTER THREE

THAT he had actually passed through the experience of the last few minutes, that it was a reality and not some beautiful phantasm of the red and gold world which again lay quiet and lifeless about him, Philip could scarcely convince himself as he made his way back to the canoe and the fire. The discovery of this girl, buried six hundred miles in a wilderness that was almost a terra incognita to the white man, was sufficient to bewilder him. And only now, as he kicked the burning embers from under the pails, and looked at his watch to time himself, did he begin to realize that he had not sensed a hundredth part of the miracle of it.

Now that he was alone, question after question leapt unanswered through his mind, and every vein in his body throbbed with strange excitement. Not for an instant did he doubt what she had said. This world—the forests about him, the lakes, the blue skies above, were her home. And yet, struggling vainly for a solution of the mystery, he told himself

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in the next breath that this could not be possible. Her voice had revealed nothing of the wilderness —except in its sweetness. Not a break had marred the purity of her speech. She had risen before him like the queen of some wonderful kingdom, and not like a forest girl. And in her face he had seen the soul of one who had looked upon the world as the world lived outside of its forest walls. Yet he believed her. This was her home. Her hair, her eyes, the flowerlike lithesomeness of her beautiful body—and something more, something that he could not see but which he could *feel* in her presence, told him that this was so. This wonder-world about him was her home. But why—how?

He seated himself on a rock, holding the open watch in his hand. Of one thing he was sure. She was oppressed by a strange fear. It was not the fear of being alone, of being lost, of some happen-chance peril that she might fancy was threatening her. It was a deeper, bigger thing than that. And she had confessed to him—not wholly, but enough to make him know—that this fear was of man. He felt at this thought a little thrill of joy, of undefinable exultation. He sprang from the rock and went down to the shore of the lake, scanning its surface

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with eager, challenging eyes. In these moments he forgot that civilization was waiting for him, that for eighteen months he had been struggling between life and death at the naked and barbarous end of the earth. All at once, in the space of a few minutes, his world had shrunken until it held but two things for him—the autumn-tinted forests, and the girl. Beyond these he thought of nothing except the minutes that were dragging like thirty weights of lead.

As the hand of his watch marked off the twenty-fifth of the prescribed thirty he turned his steps in the direction of the pool. He half expected that she would be there when he came over the ridge of rock. But she had not returned. He looked up the coulee, and then at the firm white sand close to the water. The imprints of her feet were there—small, narrow imprints of a heeled shoe. Unconsciously he smiled, for no other reason than that each surprise he encountered was a new delight to him. A forest girl as he had known them would have worn moccasins—six hundred miles from civilization.

As he was about to leap across the narrow neck of the pool he noticed a white object almost buried in the dry sand, and picked it up. It was a handkerchief; and this, too, was a surprise. He had not

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particularly noticed her dress, except that it was soft and clinging blue. The handkerchief he looked at more closely. It was of fine linen with a border of lace, and so soft that he could have hidden it in the palm of his hand. From it rose a faint, sweet scent of the wild rock violet. He knew that it was rock violet, because more than once he had crushed the blossoms between his hands. He thrust the bit of fabric in the breast of his flannel shirt, and walked swiftly up the coulee.

A hundred yards above him the stream turned abruptly, and here a strip of forest meadow grew to the water's edge. He sprang up the low bank, and stood face to face with the girl.

She had heard his approach, and was waiting for him, a little smile of welcome on her lips. She had completed her toilet. She had braided her wonderful hair, and it was gathered in a heavy, shimmering coronet about her head. There was a flutter of lace at her throat, and little fluffs of it at her wrists. She was more beautiful, more than ever like the queen of a kingdom as she stood before him now. And she was alone. He saw that in his first swift glance.

"You didn't eat the prunes?" she asked, and for the first time he saw a bit of laughter in her eyes.

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"No—I—I kicked the fire from under them," he said.

He caught the significance of her words, and her sudden sidewise gesture. A short distance from them was a small tent, and on the grass in front of the tent was spread a white cloth, on which was a meal such as he had not looked upon for two years.

"I am glad," she said, and again her eyes met his with their glow of friendly humour. "They might have spoiled your appetite, and I have made up my mind that I want you to have dinner with me. I can't offer you pie or doughnuts. But I have a home-made fruit cake, and a pot of jam that I made myself. Will you join me?"

They sat down, with the feast between them, and the girl leaned over to turn him a cup of tea from a pot that was already made and waiting. Her lovely head was near him, and he stared with hungry adoration at the thick, shining braids, and the soft white contour of her cheek and neck. She leaned back suddenly, and caught him. The words that were on her lips remained unspoken. The laughter went from her eyes. In a hot wave the blood flushed his own face.

"Forgive me if I do anything you don't understand,"

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he begged. "For weeks past I have been wondering how I would act when I met white people again. Perhaps you can't understand. But eighteen months up there—eighteen months without the sound of a white woman's voice, without a glimpse of her face, with only dreams to live on—will make me queer for a time. Can't you understand—a little?"

"A great deal," she replied so quickly that she put him at ease again. "Back there I couldn't quite believe you. I am beginning to now. You are honest. But let us not talk of ourselves until after dinner. Do you like the cake?"

She had given him a piece as large as his fist, and he bit off the end of it.

"Delicious!" he cried instantly. "Think of it—nothing but bannock, bannock, bannock for two years, and only six ounces of that a day for the last six months! Do you care if I eat the whole of it—the cake, I mean?"

Seriously she began cutting the remainder of the cake into quarters.

"It would be one of the biggest compliments you could pay me," she said. "But won't you have some boiled tongue with it, a little canned lobster, a pickle——"

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"Pickles!" he interrupted. "Just cake and pickles —please! I've dreamed of pickles up there. I've had 'em come to me at night as big as mountains, and one night I dreamed of chasing a pickle with legs for hours, and when at last I caught up with the thing it had turned into an iceberg. Please let me have just pickles and cake!"

Behind the lightness of his words she saw the truth—the craving of famine. Ashamed, he tried to hide it from her. He refused the third huge piece of cake, but she reached over and placed it in his hand. She insisted that he eat the last piece, and the last pickle in the bottle she had opened.

When he finished, she said:

"Now—I know."

"What?"

"That you have spoken the truth, that you have come from a long time in the North, and that I need not fear—what I did fear."

"And that fear? Tell me——"

She answered calmly, and in her eyes and the lines of her face came a look of despair which she had almost hidden from him until now.

"I was thinking during those thirty minutes you were away," she said. "And I realized what folly

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it was in me to tell you as much as I have. Back there, for just one insane moment, I thought that you might help me in a situation which is as terrible as any you may have faced in your months of Arctic night. But it is impossible. All that I can ask of you now—all that I can demand of you to prove that you are the man you said you were—is that you leave me, and never whisper a word into another ear of our meeting. Will you promise that?"

"To promise that—would be lying," he said slowly, and his hand unclenched and lay listlessly on his knee. "If there is a reason—some good reason why I should leave you—then I will go."

"Then—you demand a reason?"

"To demand a reason would be——"

He hesitated, and she added:

"Unchivalrous."

"Yes—more than that," he replied softly. He bowed his head, and for a moment she saw the tinge of gray in his blond hair, the droop of his clean, strong shoulders, the *something* of hopelessness in his gesture. A new light flashed into her own face. She raised a hand, as if to reach out to him, and dropped it as he looked up.

"Will you let me help you?" he asked.

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She was not looking at him, but beyond him. In her face he saw again the strange light of hope that had illumined it at the pool.

"If I could believe," she whispered, still looking beyond him. "If I could trust you, as I have read that the maidens of old trusted their knights. But —it seems impossible. In those days, centuries and centuries ago, I guess, womanhood was next to—God. Men fought for it, and died for it, to keep it pure and holy. If you had come to me then you would have levelled your lance and fought for me without asking a question, without demanding a reward, without reasoning whether I was right or wrong—and all because I was a woman. Now it is different. You are a part of civilization, and if you should do all that I might ask of you it would be because you have a price in view. I know. I have looked into you. I understand. That price would be—*me!*"

She looked at him now, her breast throbbing, almost a sob in her quivering voice, defying him to deny the truth of her words.

"You have struck home," he said, and his voice sounded strange to himself. "And I am not sorry. I am glad that you have seen—and understand. It seems almost indecent for me to tell you this, when

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I have known you for such a short time. But I have known you for years—in my hopes and dreams. For you I would go to the end of the world. And I can do what other men have done, centuries ago. They called them knights. You may call me a *man!*"

At his words she rose from where she had been sitting. She faced the radiant walls of the forests that rolled billow upon billow in the distance, and the sun lighted up her crown of hair in a glory. One hand still clung to her breast. She was breathing even more quickly, and the flush had deepened in her cheek until it was like the tender stain of the crushed bakneesh. Philip rose and stood beside her. His shoulders were back. He looked where she looked, and as he gazed upon the red and gold billows of forest that melted away against the distant sky he felt a new and glorious fire throbbing in his veins. From the forests their eyes turned—and met. He held out his hand. And slowly her own hand fluttered at her breast, and was given to him.

"I am quite sure that I understand you now," he said, and his voice was the low, steady, fighting voice of the man new-born. "I will be your knight, as you have read of the knights of old. I will urge no

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reward that is not freely given. Now—will you let me help you?"

For a moment she allowed him to hold her hand. Then she gently withdrew it and stepped back from him.

"You must first understand before you offer yourself," she said. "I cannot tell you what my trouble is. You will never know. And when it is over, when you have helped me across the abyss, then will come the greatest trial of all for you. I believe—when I tell you that last thing which you must do—that you will regard me as a monster, and draw back. But it is necessary. If you fight for me, it must be in the dark. You will not know why you are doing the things I ask you to do. You may guess, but you would not guess the truth if you lived a thousand years. Your one reward will be the knowledge that you have fought for a woman, and that you have saved her. Now, do you still want to help me?'

"I can't understand," he gasped. "But—yes—I would still accept the inevitable. I have promised you that I will do as you have dreamed that knights of old have done. To leave you now would be"—he turned his head with a gesture of hopelessness—"an empty world forever. I have told you now.

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But you could not understand and believe unless I did. I love you."

He spoke as quietly and with as little passion in his voice as if he were speaking the words from a book. But their very quietness made them convincing. She started, and the colour left her face. Then it returned, flooding her cheeks with a feverish glow.

"In that is the danger," she said quickly. "But you have spoken the words as I would have had you speak them. It is this danger that must be buried —deep—deep. And you will bury it. You will urge no questions that I do not wish to answer. You will fight for me, blindly, knowing only that what I ask you to do is not sinful nor wrong. And in the end——"

She hesitated. Her face had grown as tense as his own.

"And in the end," she whispered, "your greatest reward can be only the knowledge that in living this knighthood for me you have won what I can never give to any man. The world can hold only one such man for a woman. For your faith must be immeasurable, your love as pure as the withered violets out there among the rocks if you live up to the tests ahead

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of you. You will think me mad when I have finished. But I am sane. Off there, in the Snowbird Lake country, is my home. I am alone. No other white man or woman is with me. As my knight, the one hope of salvation that I cling to now, you will return with me to that place—as my husband. To all but ourselves we shall be man and wife. I will bear your name—or the one by which you must be known. And at the very end of all, in that hour of triumph when you know that you have borne me safely over that abyss at the brink of which I am hovering now, you will go off into the forest, and——"

She approached him, and laid a hand on his arm.

"You will not come back," she finished, so gently that he scarcely heard her words. "You will die—for me—for all who have known you."

"Good God!" he breathed, and he stared over her head to where the red and gold billows of the forests seemed to melt away into the skies.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THUS they stood for many seconds. Never for an instant did her eyes leave his face, and Philip looked straight over her head into that distant radiance of the forest mountains. It was she whose emotions revealed themselves now. The blood came and went in her cheeks. The soft lace at her throat rose and fell swiftly. In her eyes and face there was a thing which she had not dared to reveal to him before—a prayerful, pleading anxiety that was almost ready to break into tears.

At last she had come to see and believe in the strength and wonder of this man who had come to her from out of the North, and now he stared over her head with that strange white look, as if the things she had said had raised a mountain between them. She could feel the throb of his arm on which her hand rested. All at once her calm had deserted her. She had never known a man like this, had never expected to know one; and in her face there shone the gentle loveliness of a woman whose soul and not her voice

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was pleading a great cause. It was pleading for herself. And then he looked down.

"You want to go—now," she whispered. "I knew that you would."

"Yes, I want to go," he replied, and his two hands took hers, and held them close to his breast, so that she felt the excited throbbing of his heart. "I want to go—wherever you go. Perhaps in those years of centuries ago there lived women like you to fight and die for. I no longer wonder at men fighting for them as they have sung their stories in books. I have nothing down in that world which you have called civilization—nothing except the husks of murdered hopes, ambitions, and things that were once joys. Here I have you to love, to fight for. For you cannot tell me that I must not love you, even though I swear to live up to your laws of chivalry. Unless I loved you as I do there would not be those laws."

"Then you will do all this for me—even to the end—when you must sacrifice all of that for which you have struggled, and which you have saved?"

"Yes."

"If that is so, then I trust you with my life and my honour. It is all in your keeping—all."

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Her voice broke in a sob. She snatched her hands from him, and with that sob still quivering on her lips she turned and ran swiftly to the little tent. She did not look back as she disappeared into it, and Philip turned like one in a dream and went to the summit of the bare rock ridge, from which he could look over the quiet surface of the lake and a hundred square miles of the unpeopled world which had now become so strangely his own. An hour—a little more than that—had changed the course of his life as completely as the master-strokes of a painter might have changed the tones of a canvas epic. It did not take reason or thought to impinge this fact upon him. It was a knowledge that engulfed him overwhelmingly. So short a time ago that even now he could not quite comprehend it all, he was alone out on the lake, thinking of the story of the First Woman that Jasper had told him down at Fond du Lac. Since then he had passed through a lifetime. What had happened might well have covered the space of months—or of years. He had met a woman, and like the warm sunshine she had become instantly a part of his soul, flooding him with those emotions which make life beautiful. That he had told her of this love as calmly as if she had known of it

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slumbering within his breast for years seemed to him to be neither unreal nor remarkable.

He turned his face back to the tent, but there was no movement there. He knew that there—alone—the girl was recovering from the tremendous strain under which she had been fighting. He sat down, facing the lake. For the first time his mental faculties began to adjust themselves and his blood to flow less heatedly through his veins. For the first time, too, the magnitude of his promise—of what he had undertaken—began to impress itself upon him. He had thought that in asking him to fight for her she had spoken with the physical definition of that word in mind. But at the outset she had plunged him into mystery. If she had asked him to draw the automatic at his side and leap into battle with a dozen of his kind he would not have been surprised. He had expected something like that. But this other—her first demand upon him! What could it mean? Shrouded in mystery, bound by his oath of honour to make no effort to uncover her secret, he was to accompany her back to her home *as her husband!* And after that—at the end—he was to go out into the forest, and die—for her, for all who had known him. He wondered if she had meant these words

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literally, too. He smiled, and slowly his eyes scanned the lake. He was already beginning to reason, to guess at the mystery which she had told him he could not unveil if he lived a thousand years. But he could at least work about the edges of it.

Suddenly he concentrated his gaze at a point on the lake three quarters of a mile away. It was close to shore, and he was certain that he had seen some movement there—a flash of sunlight on a shifting object. Probably he had caught a reflection of light from the palmate horn of a moose feeding among the water-lily roots. He leaned forward, and shaded his eyes. In another moment his heart gave a quicker throb. What he had seen was the flash of a paddle. He made out a canoe, and then two. They were moving close in-shore, one following the other, and apparently taking advantage of the shadows of the forest. Philip's hand shifted to the butt of his automatic. After all there might be fighting of the good old-fashioned kind. He looked back in the direction of the tent.

The girl had reappeared, and was looking at him. She waved a hand, and he ran down to meet her. She had been crying. The dampness of tears still clung to her lashes; but the smile on her lips was sweet

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and welcoming, and now, so frankly that his face burned with pleasure, she held out a hand to him.

"I was rude to run away from you in that way," she apologized. "But I couldn't cry before you. And I wanted to cry."

"Because you were glad, or sorry?" he asked.

"A little of both," she replied. "But mostly glad. A few hours ago it didn't seem possible that there was any hope for me. Now——"

"There is hope," he urged.

"Yes, there is hope."

For an instant he felt the warm thrill of her fingers as they clung tighter to his. Then she withdrew her hand, gently, smiling at him with sweet confidence. Her eyes were like pure, soft violets. He wanted to kneel at her feet, and cry out his thanks to God for sending him to her. Instead of betraying his emotion, he spoke of the canoes.

"There are two canoes coming along the shore of the lake," he said. "Are you expecting some one?"

The smile left her lips. He was startled by the suddenness with which the colour ebbed from her face and the old fear leapt back into her eyes.

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"Two? You are sure there are two?" Her fingers clutched his arm almost fiercely. "And they are coming this way?"

"We can see them from the top of the rock ridge," he said. "I am sure there are two. Will you look for yourself?"

She did not speak as they hurried to the bald cap of the ridge. From the top Philip pointed down the lake. The two canoes were in plain view now. Whether they contained three or four people they could not quite make out. At sight of them the last vestige of colour had left the girl's cheeks. But now, as she stood there breathing quickly in her excitement, there came a change in her. She threw back her head. Her lips parted. Her blue eyes flashed a fire in which Philip in his amazement no longer saw fear, but defiance. Her hands were clenched. She seemed taller. Back into her cheeks there burned swiftly two points of flame. All at once she put out a hand and drew him back, so that the cap of the ridge concealed them from the lake.

"An hour ago those canoes would have made me run off into the forest—and hide," she said. "But now I am not afraid! Do you understand?"

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"Then you trust me?"

"Absolutely."

"But—surely—there is something that you should tell me: Who they are, what your danger is, what I am to do."

"I am hoping that I am mistaken," she replied. "They may not be those whom I am dreading—and expecting. All I can tell you is this: You are Paul Darcambal. I am Josephine, your wife. Protect me as a wife. I will be constantly at your side. Were I alone I would know what to expect. But—with you—they may not offer me harm. If they do not, show no suspicion. But be watchful. Don't let them get behind you. And be ready always—always—to use that—if a thing so terrible must be done!" As she spoke she lay a hand on his pistol. "And remember: I am your wife!"

"To live that belief, even in a dream, will be a joy as unforgettable as life itself," he whispered, so low that, in turning her head, she made as if she had not heard him.

"Come," she said.. "Let us follow the coulee down to the lake. We can watch them from among the rocks."

She gave him her hand as they began to traverse

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the boulder-strewn bed of the creek. Suddenly he said:

"You will not suspect me of cowardice if I suggest that there is not one chance in a hundred of them discovering us?"

"No," she replied, with a glance so filled with her confidence and faith that involuntarily he held her hand closer in his own. "But I want them to find us —if they are whom I fear. We will show ourselves on the shore."

He looked at her in amazement before the significance of her words had dawned upon him. Then he laughed.

"That is the greatest proof of your faith you have given me," he said. "With me you are anxious to face your enemies. And I am as anxious to meet them."

"Don't misunderstand me," she corrected him quickly. "I am praying that they are not the ones I suspect. But if they are—why, yes, I want to face them—with you."

They had almost reached the lake when he said:

"And now, I may call you Josephine?"

"Yes, that is necessary."

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"And you will call me——"

"Paul, of course—for you are Paul Darcambal."

"Is that quite necessary?" he asked. "Is it not possible that you might allow me to retain at least a part of my name, and call me Philip? Philip Darcambal?"

"There really is no objection to that," she hesitated. "If you wish I will call you Philip. But you must also be Paul—your middle name, perhaps."

"In the event of certain exigencies," he guessed.

"Yes."

He had still assisted her over the rocks by holding to her hand, and suddenly her fingers clutched his convulsively. She pointed to a stretch of the open lake. The canoes were plainly visible not more than a quarter of a mile away. Even as he felt her trembling slightly he laughed.

"Only three!" he exclaimed. "Surely it is not going to demand a great amount of courage to face that number, Josephine?"

"It is going to take all the courage in the world to face one of them," she replied in a low, strained voice. "Can you make them out? Are they white men or Indians?"

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"The light is not right—I can't decide," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "If they are Indians——"

"They are friends," she interrupted. "Jean—my Jean Croisset—left me hiding here five days ago. He is part French and part Indian. But he could not be returning so soon. If they are white——"

"We will expose ourselves on the beach," he finished significantly.

She nodded. He saw that in spite of her struggle to remain calm she was seized again by the terror of what might be in the approaching canoes. He was straining his eyes to make out their occupants when a low cry drew his gaze to her.

"It is Jean," she gasped, and he thought that he could hear her heart beating. "It is Jean—and the others are Indians! Oh, my God, how thankful I am——"

She turned to him.

"You will go back to the camp—please. Wait for us there, I must see Jean alone. It is best that you should do this."

To obey without questioning her or expostulating against his sudden dismissal, he knew was in the code of his promise to her. And he knew by what he saw in her face that Jean's return had set the world trem-

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bling under her feet, that for her it was charged with possibilities as tremendous as if the two canoes had contained those whom she had at first feared.

"Go," she whispered. "Please go."

Without a word he returned in the direction of the camp.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CLOSE to the tent Philip sat down, smoked his pipe, and waited. Not only had the developments of the last few minutes been disappointing to him, but they had added still more to his bewilderment. He had expected and hoped for immediate physical action, something that would at least partially clear away the cloud of mystery. And at this moment, when he was expecting things to happen, there had appeared this new factor, Jean, to change the current of excitement under which Josephine was fighting. Who could Jean be? he asked himself. And why should his appearance at this time stir Josephine to a pitch of emotion only a little less tense than that roused by her fears of a short time before? She had told him that Jean was part Indian, part French, and that he "belonged to her." And his coming, he felt sure, was of tremendous significance to her.

He waited impatiently. It seemed a long time before he heard voices and the sound of footsteps over the edge of the coulee. He rose to his feet, and

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a moment later Josephine and her companion appeared not more than a dozen paces from him. His first glance was at the man. In that same instant Jean Croisset stopped in his tracks and looked at Philip. Steadily, and apparently oblivious of Josephine's presence, they measured each other, the half-breed bent a little forward, the lithe alertness of a cat in his posture, his eyes burning darkly. He was a man whose age Philip could not guess. It might have been forty. Probably it was close to that. He was bareheaded, and his long coarse hair, black as an Indian's, was shot with gray. At first it would have been difficult to name the blood that ran strongest in his veins. His hair, the thinness of his face and body, his eyes, and the tense position in which he had paused, were all Indian. Then, above these things, Philip saw the French. Swiftly it became the dominant part of the man before him, and he was not surprised when Jean advanced with outstretched hand, and said:

"M'sieur Philip, I am Jean—Jean Jacques Croisset —and I am glad you have come."

The words were spoken for Philip alone, and where she stood Josephine did not catch the strange flash of fire in the half-breed's eyes, nor did she hear his

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still more swiftly spoken words: "I am glad it is *you* that chance has sent to us, M'sieur Weyman!"

The two men gripped hands. There was something about Jean that inspired Philip's confidence, and as he returned the half-breed's greeting his eyes looked for a moment over the other's shoulder and rested on Josephine. He was astonished at the change in her. Evidently Jean had not brought her bad news. She held the pages of an open letter in her hand, and as she caught Philip's look she smiled at him with a gladness which he had not seen in her face before. She came forward quickly, and placed a hand on his arm.

"Jean's coming was a surprise," she explained. "I did not expect him for a number of days, and I dreaded what he might have to tell me. But this letter has brought me fresh cause for thankfulness, though it may enslave you a little longer to your vows of knighthood. We start for home this afternoon. Are you ready?"

"I have a little packing to do," he said, looking after Jean, who was moving toward the tent. "Twenty-seven prunes and——"

"Me," laughed Josephine. "Is it not necessary that you make room in your canoe for me?"

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Philip's face flushed with pleasure.

"Of course it is," he cried. "Everything has seemed so wonderfully unreal to me that for a moment I forgot that you were my—my wife. But how about Jean? He called me M'sieur Weyman."

"He is the one other person in the world who knows what you and I know," she explained. "That, too, was necessary. Will you go and arrange your canoe now? Jean will bring down my things and exchange them for some of your dunnage." She left him to run into the tent, reappearing quickly with a thick rabbit-skin blanket and two canoe pillows.

"These make my nest—when I'm not working," she said, thrusting them into Philip's arms. "I have a paddle, too. Jean says that I am as good as an Indian woman with it."

"Better, M'sieur," exclaimed Jean, who had come out of the tent. "It makes you work harder to see her. She is—what you call it—*gwan-auch-ewin*—so splendid! Out of the Cree you cannot speak it."

A tender glow filled Josephine's eyes as Jean began pulling up the pegs of the tent.

"A little later I will tell you about Jean," she whispered. "But now, go to your canoe. We will follow you in a few minutes."

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He left her, knowing that she had other things to say to Jean which she did not wish him to hear. As he turned toward the coulee he noticed that she still held the opened letter in her hand.

There was not much for him to do when he reached his canoe. He threw out his sleeping bag and tent, and arranged Josephine's robe and pillows so that she would sit facing him. The knowledge that she was to be with him, that they were joined in a pact which would make her his constant companion, filled him with joyous visions and anticipations. He did not stop to ask himself how long this mysterious association might last, how soon it might come to the tragic end to which she had foredoomed it. With the spirit of the adventurer who had more than once faced death with a smile, he did not believe in burning bridges ahead of him. He loved Josephine. To him this love had come as it had come to *Tristan* and *Isolde*, to *Paola* and *Francesca*—sudden and irresistible, but, unlike theirs, as pure as the air of the world which he breathed. That he knew nothing of her, that she had not even revealed her full name to him, did not affect the depth or sincerity of his emotion. Nor had her frank avowal that he could expect no reward destroyed his hope. The one big thought

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that ran through his brain now, as he arranged the canoe, was that there was room for hope, and that she had been free to accept the words he had spoken to her without dishonour to herself. If she belonged to some other man she would not have asked him to play the part of a husband. Her freedom and his right to fight for her was the one consuming fact of significance to him just now. Beside that all others were trivial and unimportant, and every drop of blood in his veins was stirred by a strange exultation.

He found himself whistling again as he refolded his blankets and straightened out his tent. When he had finished this last task he turned to find Jean standing close behind him, his dark eyes watching him closely. As he greeted the half-breed, Philip looked for Josephine.

"I am alone, M'sieur," said Jean, coming close to Philip. "I tricked her into staying behind until I could see you for a moment as we are, alone, man to man. Why is it that our Josephine has come to trust you as she does?"

His voice was low—it was almost soft as a woman's, but deep in his eyes Philip saw the glow of a strange, slumbering fire.

"Why is it?" he persisted.

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"God only knows," exclaimed Philip, the significance of the question bursting upon him for the first time. "I hadn't thought of it, Jean. Everything has happened so quickly, so strangely, that there are many things I haven't thought of. It must be because—she thinks I'm a *man!*"

"That is it, M'sieur," replied Jean, as quietly as before. "That, and because you have come from two years in the North. I have been there. I know that it breeds men. And our Josephine knows. I could swear that there is not one man in a million she would trust as she has put faith in you. Into your hands she has given herself, and what you do means for her life or death. And for you——"

The fires in his eyes were nearer the surface now.

"What?" asked Philip tensely.

"Death—unless you play your part as a man," answered Jean. There was neither threat nor excitement in his voice, but in his eyes was the thing that Philip understood. Silently he reached out and gripped the half-breed's hand. For an instant they stood, their faces close, looking into each other's eyes. And as men see men where the fires of the earth burn low, so they read each other's souls, and their fingers tightened in a clasp of understanding.

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"What that part is to be I cannot guess," said Philip, then. "But I will play it, and it is not fear that will hold me to my promise to her. If I fail, why—kill me!"

"That is the North," breathed Jean, and in his voice was the thankfulness of prayer.

Without another word he stooped and picked up the tent and blankets. Philip was about to stop him, to speak further with him, when he saw Josephine climbing over the bulwark of rocks between them and the trail. He hurried to meet her. Her arms were full, and she allowed him to take a part of her load. With what Jean had brought this was all that was to go in Philip's canoe, and the half-breed remained to help them off.

"You will go straight across the lake," he said to Philip. "If you paddle slowly, I will catch up with you."

Philip seated himself near the stern, facing Josephine, and Jean gave the canoe a shove that sent it skimming like a swallow on the smooth surface of the lake. For a moment Philip did not dip his paddle. He looked at the girl who sat so near to him, her head bent over in pretence of seeing that all was right, the sun melting away into rich colours in the thick coils of

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her hair. There filled him an overwhelming desire to reach over and touch the shining braids, to feel the thrill of their warmth and sweetness, and something of this desire was in his face when she looked up at him, a look of gentle thankfulness disturbed a little by anxiety in her eyes. He had not noticed fully how wonderfully blue her eyes were until now, and soft and tender they were when free of the excitement of fear and mental strain. They were more than ever like the wild wood violets, flecked with those same little brown spots which had made him think sometimes that the flowers were full of laughter. There was something of wistfulness, of thought for him in her eyes now, and in pure joy he laughed.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked.

"Because I am happy," he replied, and sent the canoe ahead with a first deep stroke. "I have never been happier in my life. I did not know that it was possible to feel as I do."

"And I am just beginning to feel my selfishness," she said. "You have thought only of me. You are making a wonderful sacrifice for me. You have nothing to gain, nothing to expect but the things that make me shudder. And I have thought of my-

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self alone, selfishly, unreasonably. It is not fair, and yet this is the only way that it can be."

"I am satisfied," he said. "I have nothing much to sacrifice, except myself."

She leaned forward, with her chin in the cup of her hands, and looked at him steadily.

"You have people?"

"None who cares for me. My mother was the last. She died before I came North."

"And you have no sisters—or brothers?"

"None living."

For a moment she was silent. Then she said gently, looking into his eyes:

"I wish I had known—that I had guessed—before I let you come this far. I am sorry now—sorry that I didn't send you away. You are different from other men I have known—and you have had your suffering. And now—I must hurt you again. It wouldn't be so bad if you didn't care for me. I don't want to hurt you—because—I believe in you."

"And is that all—because you believe me?"

She did not answer. Her hands clasped at her breast. She looked beyond him to the shore they were leaving.

"You must leave me," she said then, and her voice

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was as lifeless as his had been. "I am beginning to see now. It all happened so suddenly that I could not think. But if you love me you must not go on. It is impossible. I would rather suffer my own fate than have you do that. When we reach the other shore you must leave me."

She was struggling to keep back her emotion, fighting to hold it within her own breast.

"You must go back," she repeated, staring into his set face. "If you don't, you will be hurt terribly, terribly!"

And then, suddenly, she slipped lower among the cushions he had placed for her, and buried her face in one of them with a moaning grief that cut to his soul. She was sobbing now, like a child. In this moment Philip forgot all restraint. He leaned forward and put a hand on her shining head, and bent his face close down to hers. His free hand touched one of her hands, and he held it tightly.

"Listen, my Josephine," he whispered. "I am not going to turn back, I am going on with you. That is our pact. At the end I know what to expect. You have told me; and I, too, believe. But whatever happens, in spite of all that may happen, I will still have received more than all else in the world

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could give me. For I will have known you, and you will be my salvation. I am going on."

For an instant he felt the fluttering pressure of her fingers on his. It was an answer a thousand times more precious to him than words, and he knew that he had won. Still lower he bent his head, until for an instant his lips touched the soft, living warmth of her hair. And then he leaned back, freeing her hand, and into his face had leaped soul and life and fighting strength; and under his breath he gave new thanks to God, and to the sun, and the blue sky above, while from behind them came skimming over the water the slim birchbark canoe of Jean Jacques Croisset.

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CHAPTER SIX

AT THE touch of Weyman's lips to her hair Josephine lay very still, and Philip wondered if she had felt that swift, stolen caress. Almost he hoped that she had. The silken tress where for an instant his lips had rested seemed to him now like some precious communion cup in whose sacredness he had pledged himself. Yet had he believed that she was conscious of his act he would have begged her forgiveness. He waited, breathing softly, putting greater sweep into his paddle to keep Jean well behind them.

Slowly the tremulous unrest of Josephine's shoulders ceased. She raised her head and looked at him, her lovely face damp with tears, her eyes shimmering like velvety pools through their mist. She did not speak. She was woman now—all woman. Her strength, the bearing which had made him think of her as a queen, the fighting tension which she had been under, were gone. Until she looked at him through her tears her presence had been like that of

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some wonderful and unreal creature who held the control to his every act in the cup of her hands. He thought no longer of himself now. He knew that to him she had relinquished the mysterious fight under which she had been struggling. In her eyes he read her surrender. From this hour the fight was his. She told him, without speaking. And the glory of it all thrilled him with a sacred happiness so that he wanted to drop his paddle, draw her close into his arms, and tell her that there was no power in the world that could harm her now. But instead of this he laughed low and joyously full into her eyes, and her lips smiled gently back at him. And so they understood without words.

Behind them, Jean had been coming up swiftly, and now they heard him break for an instant into the chorus of one of the wild half-breed songs, and Philip listened to the words of the chant which is as old in the Northland as the ancient brass cannon and the crumbling fortress rocks at York Factory:

"O, ze beeg black bear, he go to court,
He go to court a mate;
He court to ze Sout',
He court to ze Nort',
He court to ze shores of ze Indian Lake."

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And then, in the moment's silence that followed, Philip threw back his head, and in a voice almost as wild and untrained as Jean Croisset's, he shouted back:

"Oh! the fur fleets sing on Temiskaming,
As the ashen paddles bend,
And the crews carouse at Rupert's House,
At the sullen winter's end.
But my days are done where the lean wolves run,
And I ripple no more the path
Where the gray geese race 'cross the red moon's face
From the white wind's Arctic wrath."

The suspense was broken. The two men's voices, rising in their crude strength, sending forth into the still wilderness both triumph and defiance, brought the quick flush of living back into Josephine's face. She guessed why Jean had started his chant—to give her courage. She *knew* why Philip had responded. And now Jean swept up beside them, a smile on his thin, dark face.

"The Good Virgin preserve us, M'sieur, but our voices are like those of two beasts," he cried.

"Great, true, fighting beasts," whispered Josephine under her breath. "How I would hate almost——"

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She had suddenly flushed to the roots of her hair.

"What?" asked Philip.

"To hear men sing like women," she finished.

As swiftly as he had come up Jean and his canoe had sped on ahead of them.

"You should have heard us sing that up in our snow hut, when for five months the sun never sent a streak above the horizon," said Philip. "At the end—in the fourth month—it was more like the wailing of madmen. MacTavish died then: a young half Scot, of the Royal Mounted. After that Radisson and I were alone, and sometimes we used to see how loud we could shout it, and always, when we came to those two last lines——"

She interrupted him:

"Where the gray geese race 'cross the red moon's face
From the white wind's Arctic wrath."

"Your memory is splendid!" he cried admiringly. "Yes, always when we came to the end of those lines, the white foxes would answer us from out on the barrens, and we would wait for the sneaking yelping of them before we went on. They haunted us like

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little demons, those foxes, and never once could we catch a glimpse of them during the long night. They helped to drive MacTavish mad. He died begging us to keep them away from him. One day I was wakened by Radisson crying like a baby, and when I sat up in my ice bunk he caught me by the shoulders and told me that he had seen something that looked like the glow of a fire thousands and thousands of miles away. It was the sun, and it came just in time."

"And this other man you speak of, Radisson?" she asked.

"He died two hundred miles back," replied Philip quietly. "But that is unpleasant to speak of. Look ahead. Isn't that ridge of the forest glorious in the sunlight?"

She did not take her eyes from his face.

"Do you know, I think there is something wonderful about you," she said, so gently and frankly that the blood rushed to his cheeks. "Some day I want to learn those words that helped to keep you alive up there. I want to know all of the story, because I think I can understand. There was more to it—something after the foxes yelped back at you?"

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"This," he said, and ahead of them Jean Croisset rested on his paddle to listen to Philip's voice:

"My seams gape wide, and I'm tossed aside
To rot on a lonely shore,
While the leaves and mould like a shroud enfold,
For the last of my trails are o'er;
But I float in dreams on Northland streams
That never again I'll see,
As I lie on the marge of the old Portage,
With grief for company."

"A canoe!" breathed the girl, looking back over the sunlit lake.

"Yes, a canoe, cast aside, forgotten, as sometimes men and women are forgotten when down and out."

"Men and women who live in dreams," she added. "And with such dreams there must always be grief."

There was a moment of the old pain in her face, a little catch in her breath, and then she turned and looked at the forest ridge to which he had called her attention.

"We go deep into that forest," she said. "We enter a creek just beyond where Jean is waiting for us, and Adare House is a hundred miles to the south and east." She faced him with a quick smile. "My name is Adare," she explained, "Josephine Adare."

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"Is—or was?" he asked.

"Is," she said; then, seeing the correcting challenge in his eyes she added quickly: "But only to you. To all others I am Madame Paul Darcambal."

"Paul?"

"Pardon me, I mean Philip."

They were close to shore, and fearing that Jean might become suspicious of his tardiness, Philip bent to his paddle and was soon in the half-breed's wake. Where he had thought there was only the thick forest he saw a narrow opening toward which Jean was speeding in his canoe. Five minutes later they passed under a thick mass of overhanging spruce boughs into a narrow stream so still and black in the deep shadows of the forest that it looked like oil. There was something a little awesome in the suddenness and completeness with which they were swallowed up. Over their heads the spruce and cedar tops met and shut out the sunlight. On both sides of them the forest was thick and black. The trail of the stream itself was like a tunnel, silent, dark, mysterious. The paddles dipped noiselessly, and the two canoes travelled side by side.

"There are few who know of this break into the forest," said Jean in a low voice. "Listen, M'sieur!"

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From out of the gloom ahead of them there came a faint, oily splashing.

"Otter," whispered Jean. "The stream is like this for many miles, and it is full of life that you can never see because of the darkness."

Something in the stillness and the gloom held them silent. The canoes slipped along like shadows, and sometimes they bent their heads to escape the low-hanging boughs. Josephine's face shone whitely in the dusk. She was alert and listening. When she spoke it was in a voice strangely subdued.

"I love this stream," she whispered. "It is full of life. On all sides of us, in the forest, there is life. The Indians do not come here, because they have a superstitious dread of this eternal gloom and quiet. They call it the Spirit Stream. Even Jean is a little oppressed by it. See how closely he keeps to us. I love it, because I love everything that is wild. Listen! Did you hear that?"

"*Mooswa*," spoke Jean out of the gloom close to them.

"Yes, a moose," she said. "Here is where I saw my first moose, so many years ago that it is time for me to forget," she laughed softly. "I think I had just passed my fourth birthday."

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"You were four on the day we started, ma Josephine," came Jean's voice as his canoe shot slowly ahead where the stream narrowed; and then his voice came back more faintly: "that was sixteen years ago to-day."

A shot breaking the dead stillness of the sunless world about him could not have sent the blood rushing through Philip's veins more swiftly than Jean's last words. For a moment he stopped his paddling and leaned forward so that he could look close into Josephine's face.

"This is your birthday?"

"Yes. You ate my birthday cake."

She heard the strange, happy catch in his breath as he straightened back and resumed his work. Mile after mile they wound their way through the mysterious, subterranean-like stream, speaking seldom, and listening intently for the breaks in the death-like stillness that spoke of life. Now and then they caught the ghostly flutter of owls in the gloom, like floating spirits; back in the forest saplings snapped and brush crashed underfoot as caribou or moose caught the man-scent; they heard once the panting, sniffing inquiry of a bear close at hand, and Philip reached forward for his rifle. For an instant Joseph-

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ine's hand fluttered to his own, and held it back, and the dark glow of her eyes said: "Don't kill." Here there were no big-eyed moose-birds, none of the mellow throat sounds of the brush sparrow, no harsh janglings of the gaudily coloured jays. In the timber fell the soft footpads of creatures with claw and fang, marauders and outlaws of darkness. Light, sunshine, everything that loved the openness of day were beyond. For more than an hour they had driven their canoes steadily on, when, as suddenly as they had entered it, they slipped out from the cavernous gloom into the sunlight again.

Josephine drew a deep breath as the sunlight flooded her face and hair.

"I have my own name for that place," she said. "I call it the Valley of Silent Things. It is a great swamp, and they say that the moss grows in it so deep that caribou and deer walk over it without breaking through."

The stream was swelling out into a narrow, finger-like lake that stretched for a mile or more ahead of them, and she turned to nod her head at the spruce and cedar shores with their colourings of red and gold, where birch, and poplar, and ash splashed vividly against the darker background.

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"From now on it is all like that," she said. "Lake after lake, most of them as narrow as this, clear to the doors of Adare House. It is a wonderful lake country, and one may easily lose one's self—hundreds of lakes, I guess, running through the forests like Venetian canals."

"I would not be surprised if you told me you had been in Venice," he replied. "To-day is your birthday—your twentieth. Have you lived all those years here?"

He repressed his desire to question her, because he knew that she understood that to be a part of his promise to her. In what he now asked her he could not believe that he was treading upon prohibited ground, and in the face of their apparent innocence he was dismayed at the effect his words had upon her. It seemed to him that her eyes flinched when he spoke, as if he had struck at her. There passed over her face the look which he had come to dread: a swift, tense betrayal of the grief which he knew was eating at her soul, and which she was fighting so courageously to hide from him. It had come and gone in a flash, but the pain of it was left with him. She smiled at him a bit tremulously.

"I understand why you ask that," she said, "and

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it is no more than fair that I should tell you. Of course you are wondering a great deal about me. You have just asked yourself how I could ever hear of such a place as Venice away up here among the Indians. Why, do you know"—she leaned forward, as if to whisper a secret, her blue eyes shining with a sudden laughter—"I've even read the 'Lives' of Plutarch, and I'm waiting patiently for the English to hang a few of those terrible Lucretia Borgias who call themselves militant suffragettes!"

"I—I—beg your pardon," he stammered helplessly.

She no longer betrayed the hurt of his question, and so sweet was the laughter of her eyes and lips that he laughed back at her, in spite of his embarrassment. Then, all at once, she became serious.

"I am terribly unfair to you," she apologized gently; and then, looking across the water, she added: "Yes, I've lived almost all of those twenty years up here—among the forests. They sent me to the Mission school at Fort Churchill, over on Hudson's Bay, for three years; and after that, until I was seventeen, I had a little white-haired English governess at Adare House. If she had lived——" Her hands clenched the sides of the canoe, and she looked

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straight away from Philip. She seemed to force the words that came from her lips then: "When I was eighteen I went to Montreal—and lived there a year. That is all—that one year—away from—my forests——"

He almost failed to hear the last words, and he made no effort to reply. He kept his canoe nearer to Jean's, so that frequently they were running side by side. In the quick fall of the early northern night the sun was becoming more and more of a red haze in the sky as it sank farther toward the western forests. Josephine had changed her position, so that she now sat facing the bow of the canoe. She leaned a little forward, her elbows resting in her lap, her chin tilted in the cup of her hands, looking steadily ahead, and for a long time no sound but the steady dip, dip, dip of the two paddles broke the stillness of their progress. Scarcely once did Philip take his eyes from her. Every turn, every passing of shadow and light, each breath of wind that set stirring the shimmering tresses of her hair, made her more beautiful to him. From red gold to the rich and lustrous brown of the ripened wintel berries he marked the marvellous changing of her hair with the setting of the sun. A quick chill was growing in the air now,

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and after a little he crept forward and slipped a light blanket about the slender shoulders. Even then Josephine did not speak, but looked up at him, and smiled her thanks. In his eyes, his touch, even his subdued breath, were the whispers of his adoration.

Movement roused Jean from his Indianlike silence. As Philip moved back, he called:

"It is four o'clock, M'sieur. We will have darkness in an hour. There is a place to camp and tepee poles ready cut on the point ahead of us."

Fifteen minutes later Philip ran his canoe ashore close to Jean Croisset's on a beach of white sand. He could not help seeing that, from the moment she had answered his question out on the lake, a change had come over Josephine. For a short time that afternoon she had risen from out of the thing that oppressed her, and once or twice there had been almost happiness in her smile and laughter. Now she seemed to have sunk again under its smothering grip. It was as if the chill and dismal gloom of approaching night had robbed her cheeks of colour, and had given a tired droop to her shoulders as she sat silently, and waited for them to make her tent comfortable. When it was up, and the blankets spread, she went in and left them alone, and the last glimpse that he had of

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her face left with Philip a cameolike impression of hopelessness that made him want to call out her name, yet held him speechless. He looked closely at Jean as they put up their own tent, and for the first time he saw that the mask had fallen from the half-breed's face, and that it was filled with that same mysterious hopelessness and despair. Almost roughly he caught him by the shoulder.

"See here, Jean Croisset," he cried impatiently, "you're a man. What are you afraid of?"

"God," replied Jean so quietly that Philip dropped his hand from his shoulder in astonishment. "Nothing else in the world am I afraid of, M'sieur!"

"Then why—why in the name of that God do you look like this?" demanded Philip. "You saw her go into the tent. She is disheartened, hopeless because of something that I can't guess at, cold and shivering and white because of a *fear* of something. She is a woman. You are a man. Are *you* afraid?"

"No, not afraid, M'sieur. It is her grief that hurts me, not fear. If it would help her I would let you take this knife at my side and cut me into pieces so small that the birds could carry them away. I know what you mean. You think I am not a fighter. Our Lady in Heaven, if fighting could only save her!"

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"And it cannot?"

"No, M'sieur. Nothing can save her. You can help, but you cannot save her. I believe that nothing like this terrible thing that has come to her has happened before since the world began. It is a mistake that it has come once. The Great God would not let it happen twice."

He spoke calmly. Philip could find no words with which to reply. His hand slipped from Jean's arm to his hand, and their fingers gripped. Thus for a space they stood. Philip broke the silence.

"I love her, Jean," he spoke softly.

"Every one loves her, M'sieur. All our forest people call her '*L'Ange.*'"

"And still you say there is no hope?"

"None."

"Not even—if we fight——?"

Jean's fingers tightened about his like cords of steel.

"We may kill, M'sieur, but that will not save hearts crushed like—See!—like I crush these ash berries under my foot! I tell you again, nothing like this has ever happened before since the world began, and nothing like it will ever happen again!"

Steadily Philip looked into Jean's eyes.

"You have seen something of the world, Jean?"

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"A good deal, M'sieur. For seven years I went to school at Montreal, and prepared myself for the holy calling of Missioner. That was many years ago. I am now simply Jean Jacques Croisset, of the forests."

"Then you know—you must know, that where there is life there is hope," argued Philip eagerly. "I have promised not to pry after her secret, to fight for her only as she tells me to fight. But if I knew, Jean. If I knew what this trouble is—how and where to fight! Is this knowledge—impossible?"

"Impossible, M'sieur!"

Slowly Jean withdrew his hand.

"Don't take it that way, man," exclaimed Philip quickly. "I'm not ferreting for her secret now. Only I've got to know—is it impossible for her to tell me?"

"As impossible, M'sieur, as it would be for me. And Our Lady herself could not make me do that if I heard Her voice commanding me out of Heaven. All that I can do is to wait, and watch, and guard. And all that you can do, M'sieur, is to play the part she has asked of you. In doing that, and doing it well, you will keep the last bit of life in her heart from being trampled out. If you love her"—he

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picked up a tepee pole before he finished, and then said—"you will do as you have promised!"

There was a finality in the shrug of Jean's shoulders which Philip did not question. He picked up an axe, and while Jean arranged the tepee poles began to chop down a dry birch. As the chips flew his mind flew faster. In his optimism he had half believed that the cloud of mystery in which Josephine had buried him would, in time, be voluntarily lifted by her. He had not been able to make himself believe that any situation could exist where hopelessness was as complete as she had described. Without arguing with himself he had taken it for granted that she had been labouring under a tremendous strain, and that no matter what her trouble was it had come to look immeasurably darker to her than it really was. But Jean's attitude, his low and unexcited voice, and the almost omniscient decisiveness of his words had convinced him that Josephine had not painted it as blackly as she might. She, at least, had seemed to see a ray of hope. Jean saw none, and Philip realized that the half-breed's calm and unheated judgment was more to be reckoned with than hers. At the same time, he did not feel dismayed. He was of the sort who have born in them the fighting instinct.

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And with this instinct, which is two thirds of life's battle won, goes the sort of optimism that has opened up raw worlds to the trails of men. Without the one the other cannot exist.

As the blows of his axe cut deep into the birch, Philip knew that so long as there is life and freedom and a sun above it is impossible for hope to become a thing of char and ash. He did not use logic. He simply *lived!* He was alive, and he loved Josephine.

The muscles of his arms were like sinews of raw-hide. Every fibre in his body was strung with a splendid strength. His brain was as clear as the unpolluted air that drifted over the cedar and spruce. And now to these tremendous forces had come the added strength of the most wonderful thing in the world: love of a woman. In spite of all that Josephine and Jean had said, in spite of all the odds that might be against him, he was confident of winning whatever fight might be ahead of him.

He not only felt confident, but cheerful. He did not try to make Jean understand what it meant to be in camp with the company of a woman for the first time in two years. Long after the tents were up and the birch-fire was crackling cheerfully in the darkness Josephine still remained in her tent. But

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the mere fact that she was there lifted Philip's soul to the skies.

And Josephine, with a blanket drawn about her shoulders, lay in the thick gloom of her tent and listened to him. His far-reaching, exuberant whistling seemed to warm her. She heard him laughing and talking with Jean, whose voice never came to her; farther back, where he was cutting down another birch, she heard him shout out the words of a song between blows; and once, sotto voce, and close to her tent, she quite distinctly heard him say "Damn!" She knew that he had stumbled with an armful of wood, and for the first time in that darkness and her misery she smiled. That one word alone Philip had not intended that she should hear. But when it was out he picked himself up and laughed.

He did not meddle with Jean's cook-fire, but he built a second fire where the cheer of it would light up Josephine's tent, and piled dry logs on it until the flame of it lighted up the gloom about them for a hundred feet. And then, with a pan in one hand and a stick in the other, he came close and beat a din that could have been heard a quarter of a mile away.

Josephine came out full in the flood-light of the fire, and he saw that she had been crying. Even now

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there was a tremble of her lips as she smiled her gratitude. He dropped his pan and stick, and went to her. It seemed as if this last hour in the darkness of camp had brought her nearer to him, and he gently took her hands in his own and held them for a moment close to him. They were cold and trembling, and one of them that had rested under her cheek was damp with tears.

"You mustn't do this any more," he whispered.

"I'll try not to," she promised. "Please let me stand a little in the warmth of the fire. I'm cold."

He led her close to the flaming birch logs and the heat soon brought a warm flush into her cheeks. Then they went to where Jean had spread out their supper on the ground. When she had seated herself on the pile of blankets they had arranged for her, Josephine looked across at Philip, squatted Indian-fashion opposite her, and smiled apologetically.

"I'm afraid your opinion of me isn't getting better," she said. "I'm not much of a—a—sport—to let you men get supper by yourselves, am I? You see—I'm taking advantage of my birthday."

"*Oui, ma belle princesse,*" laughed Jean softly, a tender look coming into his thin, dark face. "And do you remember that other birthday, years and

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"To-night, my Josephine — just this night — may I wish you all the hope and happiness that God can bring you, and kiss you — once ——"

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years ago, when you took advantage of Jean Croisset while he was sleeping? *Non*, you do not remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"She was six, M'sieur," explained Jean, "and while I slept, dreaming of one gr-r-rand paradise, she cut off my moustaches. They were splendid, those moustaches, but they would never grow right after that, and so I have gone shaven."

In spite of her efforts to appear cheerful, Philip could see that Josephine was glad when the meal was over, and that she was forcing herself to sip at a second cup of tea on their account. He accompanied her back to the tent after she had bade Jean good-night, and as they stood for a moment before the open flap there filled the girl's face a look that was partly of self-reproach and partly of wistful entreaty for his understanding and forgiveness.

"You have been good to me," she said. "No one can ever know how good you have been to me, what it has meant to me, and I thank you."

She bowed her head, and again he restrained the impulse to gather her close up in his arms. When she looked up he was holding something toward her in the palm of his hand. It was a little Bible, worn and frayed at the edges, pathetic in its raggedness.

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"A long time ago, my mother gave me this Bible," he said. "She told me that as long as I carried it, and believed in it, no harm could come to me, and I guess she was right. It was her first Bible, and mine. It's grown old and ragged with me, and the water and snow have faded it. I've come to sort of believe that mother is always near this Book. I'd like you to have it, Josephine. It's the only thing I've got to offer you on your birthday."

While he was speaking he had taken one of her hands and thrust his precious gift into it. Slowly Josephine raised the little Bible to her breast. She did not speak, but for a moment Philip saw in her eyes the look for which he would have sacrificed the world; a look that told him more than all the volumes of the earth could have told of a woman's trust and faith.

He bent his head lower and whispered:

"To-night, my Josephine—just this night—may I wish you all the hope and happiness that God and my Mother can bring you, and kiss you—once——"

In that moment's silence he heard the throbbing of her heart. She seemed to have ceased breathing, and then, slowly, looking straight into his eyes, she

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lifted her lips to him, and as one who meets a soul of a thing too sanctified to touch with hands, he kissed her. Scarcely had the warm sweetness of her lips thrilled his own than she had turned from him, and was gone.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

FOR a time after they had cleared up the supper things Philip sat with Jean close to the fire and smoked. The half-breed had lapsed again into his gloom and silence. Two or three times Philip caught Jean watching him furtively. He made no effort to force a conversation, and when he had finished his pipe he rose and went to the tent which they were to share together. At last he found himself not unwilling to be alone. He closed the flap to shut out the still brilliant illumination of the fire, drew a blanket about him, and stretched himself out on the top of his sleeping bag. He wanted to think.

He closed his eyes to bring back more vividly the picture of Josephine as she had given him her lips to kiss. This, of all the unusual happenings of that afternoon, seemed most like a dream to him, yet his brain was afire with the reality of it. His mind struggled again with the hundred questions which he had asked himself that day, and in the end Josephine

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remained as completely enshrouded in mystery as ever. Yet of one thing was he convinced. The oppression of the thing under which Jean and the girl were fighting had become more acute with the turning of their faces homeward. At Adare House lay the cause of their hopelessness, of Josephine's grief, and of the gloom under which the half-breed had fallen so completely that night. Until they reached Adare House he could guess at nothing. And there—what would he find?

In spite of himself he felt creeping slowly over him a shuddering fear that he had not acknowledged before. The darkness deepening as the fire died away, the stillness of the night, the low wailing of a wind growing out of the north roused in him the unrest and doubt that sunshine and day had dispelled. An uneasy slumber came at last with this disquiet. His mind was filled with fitful dreams. Again he was back with Radisson and MacTavish, listening to the foxes out on the barrens. He heard the Scotchman's moaning madness and listened to the blast of storm. And then he heard a cry—a cry like that which MacTavish fancied he had heard in the wind an hour before he died. It was this dream-cry that roused him.

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He sat up, and his face and hands were damp. It was black in the tent. Outside even the bit of wind had died away. He reached out a hand, groping for Jean. The half-breed's blankets had not been disturbed. Then for a few moments he sat very still, listening, and wondering if the cry had been real. As he sat tense and still in the half daze of the sleep it came again. It was the shrill laughing carnival of a loon out on the lake. More than once he had laughed at comrades who had shivered at that sound and cowered until its echoes had died away in moaning wails. He understood now. He knew why the Indians called it *moakwa*—"the mad thing." He thought of MacTavish, and threw the blanket from his shoulders, and crawled out of the tent.

Only a few faintly glowing embers remained where he had piled the birch logs. The sky was full of stars. The moon, still full and red, hung low in the west. The lake lay in a silvery and unruffled shimmer. Through the silence there came to him from a great distance the coughing challenge of a bull moose inviting a rival to battle. Then Philip saw a dark object huddled close to Josephine's tent.

He moved toward it, his moccasined feet making no sound. Something impelled him to keep as

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quiet as the night itself. And when he came near he was glad. For the object was Jean. He sat with his back to a block of birch twenty paces from the door of Josephine's tent. His head had fallen forward on his chest. He was asleep, but across his knees lay his rifle, gripped tightly in both hands. Quick as a flash the truth rushed upon Philip. Like a faithful dog Jean was guarding the girl. He had kept awake as long as he could, but even in slumber his hands did not give up their hold on the rifle.

Against whom was he guarding her? What danger could there be in this quiet, starlit night for Josephine? A sudden chill ran through Philip. Did Jean mistrust *him?* Was it possible that Josephine had secretly expressed a fear which made the Frenchman watch over her while she slept? As silently as he had approached he moved away until he stood in the sand at the shore of the lake. There he looked back. He could just see Jean, a dark blot; and all at once the unfairness of his suspicion came upon him. To him Josephine had given proofs of her faith which nothing could destroy. And he understood now the reason for that tired, drawn look in Jean's face. This was not the first night he

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had watched. Every night he had guarded her until, in the small hours of dawn, his eyes had closed heavily as they were closed now.

The beginning of the gray northern dawn was not far away. Philip knew that without looking at the hour. He sensed it. It was in the air, the stillness of the forest, in the appearance of the stars and moon. To prove himself he looked at his watch with the match with which he lighted his pipe. It was half-past three. At this season of the year dawn came at five.

He walked slowly along the strip of sand between the dark wall of the forest and the lake. Not until he was a mile away from the camp did he stop. Then something happened to betray the uneasy tension to which his nerves were drawn. A sudden crash in the brush close at hand drew him about with a start, and even while he laughed at himself he stood with his automatic in his hand.

He heard the whimpering, babyish-like complaint of the porcupine that had made the sound, and still chuckling over his nervousness he seated himself on a white drift-log that had lain bleaching for half a century in the sand.

The moon had fallen behind the western forests;

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the stars were becoming fainter in the sky, and about him the darkness was drawing in like a curtain. He loved this hour that bridged the northern night with the northern day, and he sat motionless and still, covering the glow of fire in his pipe bowl with the palm of his hand.

Out of the brush ambled the porcupine, chattering and talking to itself in its queer and good-humoured way, fat as a poplar bud ready to burst, and so intent on reaching the edge of the lake that it passed in its stupid innocence so close that Philip might have struck it with a stick. And then there swooped down from out of the cover of the black spruce a gray cloudlike thing that came with the silence and lightness of a huge snowflake, hovered for an instant over the porcupine, and disappeared into the darkness beyond. And the porcupine, still oblivious of danger and what the huge owl would have done to him had he been a snowshoe rabbit instead of a monster of quills, drank his fill leisurely and ambled back as he had come, chattering his little song of good-humour and satisfaction.

One after another there came now the sounds that merged dying night into the birth of day, and for the hundredth time Philip listened to the wonders that

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never grew old for him. The laugh of the loon was no longer a raucous, mocking cry of exultation and triumph, but a timid, question note—half drowsy, half filled with fear; and from the treetops came the still lower notes of the owls, their night's hunt done, and seeking now the densest covers for the day. And then, from deep back in the forests, came a cry that was filled with both hunger and defiance—the wailing howl of a wolf. With these night sounds came the first *cheep, cheep, cheep* of the little brush sparrow, still drowsy and uncertain, but faintly heralding the day. Wings fluttered in the spruce and cedar thickets. From far overhead came the honking of Canada geese flying southward. And one by one the stars went out, and in the south-eastern skies a gray hand reached up slowly over the forests and wiped darkness from the earth. Not until then did Philip rise from his seat and turn his face toward camp.

He tried to throw off the feeling of oppression that still clung to him. By the time he reached camp he had partly succeeded. The fire was burning brightly again, and Jean was busy preparing breakfast. To his surprise he saw Josephine standing outside of her tent. She had finished brushing her hair, and was

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plaiting it in a long braid. He had wondered how they would meet that morning. His face flushed warm as he approached her. The thrill of their kiss was still on his lips, and his heart sent the memory of it burning in his eyes as he came up. Josephine turned to greet him. She was pale and calm. There were dark lines under her eyes, and her voice was steady and without emotion as she said "Good morning." It was as if he had dreamed the thing that had passed the night before. There was neither glow of tenderness, of regret, nor of memory in her eyes. Her smile was wan and forced. He knew that she was calling upon his chivalry to forget that one moment before the door of her tent. He bowed, and said simply:

"I'm afraid you didn't sleep well, Josephine. Did I disturb you when I stole out of camp?"

"I heard nothing," she replied. "Nothing but the cries of that terrible bird out on the lake. I'm afraid I didn't sleep much."

The atmosphere of the camp that morning weighted Philip's heart with a heaviness which he could not throw off. He performed his share of the work with Jean, and tried to talk to him, but Croisset would only reply to his most pointed remarks. He whistled.

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He shouted out a song back in the timber as he cut an armful of dry birch, and he returned to Jean and the girl laughing, the wood piled to his chin and the axe under his arm. Neither showed that they had heard him. The meal was eaten in a chilly silence that filled him with deepest foreboding. Josephine seemed at ease. She talked with him when he spoke to her, but there seemed now to be a mysterious restraint in every word that she uttered. She excused herself before Jean and he were through, and went to her tent. A moment later Philip rose and went down to his canoe.

In the rubber sack was the last of his tobacco. He was fumbling for it when his heart gave a great jump. A voice had spoken softly behind him:

"Philip."

Slowly, unbelieving, he turned. It was Josephine. For the first time she had called him by his name. And yet the speaking of it seemed to put a distance between them, for her voice was calm and without emotion, as she might have spoken to Jean.

"I lay awake nearly all of the night, thinking," she said. "It was a terrible thing that we did, and I am sorry—sorry——"

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In the quickening of her breath he saw how heroically she was fighting to speak steadily to him.

"You can't understand," she resumed, facing him with the steadiness of despair. "You cannot understand—until you reach Adare House. And that is what I dread, the hour when you will know what I am, and how terrible it was for me to do what I did last night. If you were like most other men, I wouldn't care so much. But you have been different."

He replied in words which he would not dare to have uttered a few hours before.

"And yet, back there when you first asked me to go with you as your husband, you knew what I would find at Adare House?" he asked, his voice low and tense. "You knew?"

"Yes."

"Then what has produced the change that makes you fear to have me go on? Is it because"—he leaned toward her, and his face was bloodless—"Is it because you care a little for me?"

"Because I respect you, yes," she said in a voice that disappointed him. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to go back into the world thinking of me as you will. You have been honest with me.

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I do not blame you for what happened last night. The fault was mine. And I have come to you now, so that you will understand that, no matter how I may appear and act, I have faith and trust in you. I would give anything that last night might be wiped out of our memories. That is impossible, but you must not think of it and you must not talk to me any more as you have, until we reach Adare House. And then——"

Her white face was pathetic as she turned away from him.

"You will not want to," she finished. "After that you will fight for me simply because you are a knight among men, and because you have promised. There will not even be the promise to bind you, for I release you from that."

Philip stood silent as she left him. He knew that to follow her and to force further conversation upon her after what she had said would be little less than brutal. She had given him to understand that from now on he was to hold himself toward her with greater restraint, and the blood flushed hot and uncomfortable into his face as he realized for the first time how he had overstepped the bounds.

All his life womanhood had been the most beautiful

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thing in the world to him. And now there was forced upon him the dread conviction that he had insulted it. He did not stop to argue that the overwhelming completeness of his love had excused him. What he thought of now was that he had found Josephine alone, had declared that love for her before he knew her name, and had followed it up by act and word which he now felt to be dishonourable. And yet, after all, would he have recalled what had happened if he could? He asked himself that question as he returned to help Jean. And he found no answer to it until they were in their canoes again and headed up the lake, Josephine sitting with her back to him, her thick silken braid falling in a sinuous and sunlit rope of red gold over her shoulders. Then he knew that he would not.

Jean gave little rest that day, and by noon they had covered twenty miles of the lake-way. An hour for dinner, and they went on. At times Josephine used her paddle, and not once during the day did she sit with her face to Philip. Late in the afternoon they camped on a portage fifty miles from Adare House.

There were no stars or moon in the sky this night.

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The wind had changed, and came from the north. In it was the biting chill of the Arctic, and overhead was a gray-dun mass of racing cloud. A dozen times Jean turned his face anxiously from the fire into the north, and held wet fingers high over his head to see if in the air was that peculiar sting by which the forest man forecasts the approach of snow.

At last he said to Philip: "The wind will grow, M'sieur," and picked up his axe.

Philip followed with his own, and they piled about Josephine's tent a thick protection of spruce and cedar boughs. Then together they brought three or four big logs to the fire. After that Philip went into their own tent, stripped off his outer garments, and buried himself in his sleeping bag. For a long time he lay awake and listened to the increasing wail of the wind in the tall spruce tops. It was not new to him. For months he had fallen asleep with the thunderous crash of ice and the screaming fury of storm in his ears. But to-night there was something in the sound which sunk him still deeper into the gloom which he had found it impossible to throw off. At last he fell asleep.

When he awoke he struck a match and looked at his watch. It was four o'clock, and he dressed and

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went outside. The wind had died down. Jean was already busy over the cook-fire, and in Josephine's tent he saw the light of a candle. She appeared a little later, wrapped close in a thick red Hudson's Bay coat, and with a marten-skin cap on her head. Something in her first appearance, the picturesqueness of her dress, the jauntiness of the little cap, and the first flush of the fire in her face filled him with the hope that sleep had given her better spirit. A closer glance dashed this hope. Without questioning her he knew that she had spent another night of mental torture. And Jean's face looked thinner, and the hollows under his eyes were deeper.

All that day the sky hung heavy and dark with cloud, and the water was rough. Early in the afternoon the wind rose again, and Croisset ran alongside them to suggest that they go ashore. He spoke to Philip, but Josephine interrupted quickly:

"We must go on, Jean," she demanded. "If it is not impossible we must reach Adare House to-night."

"It will be late—midnight," replied Jean. "And if it grows rougher——"

A dash of spray swept over the bow into the girl's face.

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"I don't care for that," she cried. "Wet and cold won't hurt us." She turned to Philip, as if needing his argument against Jean's. "Is it not possible to get me home to-night?" she asked.

"It is two o'clock," said Philip. "How far have we to go, Jean?"

"It is not the distance, M'sieur—it is that," replied Jean, as a wave sent another dash of water over Josephine. "We are twenty miles from Adare House."

Philip looked at Josephine.

"It is best for you to go ashore and wait until to-morrow, Josephine. Look at that stretch of water ahead—a mass of whitecaps."

"Please, please take me home," she pleaded, and now she spoke to Philip alone. "I'm not afraid. And I cannot live through another night like last night. Why, if anything should happen to us"—she flung back her head and smiled bravely at him through the mist of her wet hair and the drenching spray—"if anything should happen I know you'd meet it gloriously. So I'm not afraid. And I want to go home."

Philip turned to the half-breed, who had drifted a canoe length away.

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"We'll go on, Jean," he called. "We can make it by keeping close inshore. Can you swim?"

"*Oui*, M'sieur; but Josephine——"

"I can swim with her," replied Philip, and Josephine saw the old life and strength in his face again as she turned to the white-capped seas ahead of them.

Hour after hour they fought their way on after that, the wind rising stronger in their faces, the seas burying them deeper; and each time that Josephine looked back she marvelled at the man behind her, bareheaded, his hair drenched, his arms naked to the elbows, and his clear gray eyes always smiling confidence at her through the gloom of mist. Not until darkness was falling about them did Jean drop near enough to speak again. Then he shouted:

"Another hour and we reach Snowbird River, M'sieur. That is four miles from Adare House. But ahead of us the wind rushes across a wide sweep of the lake. Shall we hazard it?"

"Yes, yes," cried the girl, answering for Philip. "We must go on!"

Without another word Croisset led the way. The wind grew stronger with each minute's progress. Shouting for Jean to hold his canoe for a space,

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Philip steadied his own canoe while he spoke to the girl.

"Come back to me as quietly as you can, Josephine," he said. "Pass the dunnage ahead of you to take the place of your weight. If anything happens, I want you near me."

Cautiously Josephine did as he bade her, and as she added slowly to the ballast in the bow she drew little by little nearer to Philip. Her hand touched an object in the bottom of the canoe as she came close to him. It was one of his moccasins. She saw now his naked throat and chest. He had stripped off his heavy woollen shirt as well as his footwear. He reached out, and his hand touched her lightly as she huddled down in front of him.

"Splendid!" he laughed. "You're a little brick, Josephine, and the best comrade in a canoe that I ever saw. Now if we go over all I've got to do is to swim ashore with you. Is it good walking to Adare House?"

He did not hear her reply; but a fresh burst of the wind sent a loose strand of her hair back into his face, and he was happy. Happy in spite of a peril which neither he nor Jean would have thought of facing alone. In the darkness he could no longer see Crois-

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set or his canoe. But Jean's shout came back to him every minute on the wind, and over Josephine's head he answered. He was glad that it was so dark the girl could not see what was ahead of them now. Once or twice his own breath stopped short, when it seemed that the canoe had taken the fatal plunge which he was dreading. Every minute he figured the distance from the shore, and his chances of swimming it if they were overturned. And then, after a long time, there came a sudden lull in the wind, and the seas grew less rough. Jean's voice came from near them, filled with a thrill of relief.

"We are behind the point," he shouted. "Another mile and we will enter the Snowbird, M'sieur!"

Philip leaned forward in the gloom. Josephine's cap had fallen off, and for a moment his hand rested on her wet and wind-blown hair.

"Did you hear that?" he cried. "We're almost home."

"Yes," she shivered. "And I'm glad—glad——"

Was it an illusion of his own, or did she seem to shiver and draw away from him *at the touch of his hand?* Even in the blackness he could *feel* that she was huddled forward, her face in her hands. She did not speak to him again. When they entered the

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smooth water of the Snowbird, Jean's canoe drew close in beside them, but not a word fell from Croisset. Like shadows they moved up the stream between two black walls of forest. A steadily increasing excitement, a feeling that he was upon the eve of strange events, grew stronger in Philip. His arms and back ached, his legs were cramped, the last of his splendid strength had been called upon in the fight with wind and seas, but he forgot this exhaustion in anticipation of the hour that was drawing near. He knew that Adare House would reveal to him things which Josephine had not told him. She had said that it would, and that he would hate her then. That they were burying themselves deeper into the forest he guessed by the lessening of the wind.

Half an hour passed, and in that time his companion did not move or speak. He heard faintly a distant wailing cry. He recognized the sound. It was not a wolf-cry, but the howl of a husky. He fancied then that the girl moved, that she was gripping the sides of the canoe with her hands. For fifteen minutes more there was not a sound but the dip of the paddles and the monotone of the wind sweeping through the forest tops. Then the dog howled again, much nearer; and this time he was joined by a second,

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a third, and a fourth, until the night was filled with a din that made Philip stare wonderingly off into the blackness. There were fifty dogs if there was one in that yelping, howling horde, he told himself, and they were coming with the swiftness of the wind in their direction.

From his canoe Croisset broke the silence.

"The wind has given the pack our scent, *ma* Josephine, and they are coming to meet you," he said.

The girl made no reply, but Philip could see now that she was sitting tense and erect. As suddenly as it had begun the cry of the pack ceased. The dogs had reached the water, and were waiting. Not until Jean swung his canoe toward shore and the bow of it scraped on a gravelly bar did they give voice again, and then so close and fiercely that involuntarily Philip held his canoe back. In another moment Josephine had stepped lightly over the side in a foot of water. He could not see what happened then, except that the bar was filled with a shadowy horde of leaping, crowding, yelping beasts, and that Josephine was the centre of them. He heard her voice clear and commanding, crying out their names—Tyr, Captain, Bruno, Thor, Wamba—until their number seemed without end; he heard the metallic

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snap of fangs, quick, panting breaths, the shuffling of padded feet; and then the girl's voice grew more clear, and the sounds less, until he heard nothing but the bated breath of the pack and a low, smothered whine.

In that moment the wind-blown clouds above them broke in a narrow rift across the skies, and for an instant the moon shone through. What he saw then drew Philip's breath from him in a wondering gasp.

On the white bar stood Josephine. The wind on the lake had torn the strands of her long braid loose and her hair swept in a damp and clinging mass to her hips. She was looking toward him, as if about to speak. But it was the pack that made him stare. A sea of great shaggy heads and crouching bodies surrounded her, a fierce yellow and green-eyed horde flattened like a single beast upon their bellies, their heads turned toward her, their throats swelling and their eyes gleaming in the joyous excitement of her return. An instant of that strange and thrilling picture, and the night was black again. The girl's voice spoke softly. Bodies shuffled out of her path. And then she said, quite near to him:

"Are you coming, Philip?"

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CHAPTER EIGHT

NOT without a slight twinge of trepidation did Philip step from his canoe to her. He had not heard Croisset go ashore, and for a moment he felt as if he were deliberately placing himself at the mercy of a wolf-pack. Josephine may have guessed the effect of the savage spectacle he had beheld from the canoe, for she was close to the water's edge to meet him. She spoke, and in the pitch darkness he reached out. Her hand was groping for him, and her fingers closed firmly about his own.

"They are my bodyguard, and I have trained them all from puppies," she explained. "They don't like strangers, but will fight for anything that I touch. So I will lead you." She turned with him toward the pack, and cried in her clear, commanding voice: "*Marche*, boys!—Tyr, Captain, Thor, *Marche!* Hoosh, hoosh, *Marche!*"

It seemed as if a hundred eyes gleamed out of the blackness; then there was a movement, a whining,

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snarling, snapping movement, and as they walked up the bar and into a narrow trail Philip could hear the pack falling out to the side and behind them. Also he knew that Jean was ahead of them now. He did not speak, nor did Josephine offer to break the silence again. Still letting her hand rest in his she followed close behind the half-breed. Her hand was so cold that Philip involuntarily held it tighter in his own, as if to give it warmth. He could feel her shivering, and yet something told him that what he sensed in the darkness was not caused by chill alone. Several times her fingers closed shudderingly about his.

They had not walked more than a couple of hundred yards when a turn brought them out of the forest trail, and the blackness ahead was broken by a solitary light, a dimly lighted window in a pit of gloom.

"Marja is not expecting us to-night," apologized the girl nervously. "That is Adare House."

The loneliness of the spot, its apparent emptiness of life, the silence save for the snuffling and whining of the unseen beasts about them, stirred Philip with a curious sensation of awe. He had at least expected light and life at Adare House. Here were only the

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mystery of darkness and a deathlike quiet. Even the one light seemed turned low. As they advanced toward it a great shadow grew out of the gloom; and then, all at once, it seemed as if a curtain of the forest had been drawn aside, and away beyond the looming shadow Philip saw the glow of a camp-fire. From that distant fire there came the challenging howl of a dog, and instantly it was taken up by a score of fierce tongues about them. As Josephine's voice rose to quell the disturbance the light in the window grew suddenly brighter, and then a door opened and in it stood the figures of a man and woman. The man was standing behind the woman, looking over her shoulder, and for one moment Philip caught the flash of the lamp-glow on the barrel of a rifle.

Josephine paused.

"You will forgive me if I ask you to let me go on alone, and you follow with Jean?" she whispered. "I will try and see you again to-night, when I have dressed myself, and I am in better condition to show you hospitality."

Jean was so close that he overheard her.

"We will follow," he said softly. "Go ahead, *ma cheri.*"

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His voice was filled with an infinite gentleness, almost of pity; and as Josephine drew her hand from Philip's and went on ahead of them he dropped back close to the other's side.

"Something will happen soon which may turn your heart to stone and ice, M'sieur," he said, and his voice was scarce above a whisper. "I wanted her to tell you back there, two days ago, but she shrank from the ordeal then. It is coming to-night. And, however it may effect you, M'sieur, I ask you not to show the horror of it, but to have pity. You have perhaps known many women, but you have never known one like our Josephine. In her soul is the purity of the blue skies, the sweetness of the wild flowers, the goodness of our Blessed Lady, the Mother of Christ. You may disbelieve, and what is to come may eat at the core of your heart as it has devoured life and happiness from mine. But you will love *L'Ange*—our Josephine—just the same."

Even as he felt himself trembling strangely at Jean Croisset's words, Philip replied:

"Always, Jean, I swear that."

In the open door Josephine had paused for a moment, and was looking back. Then she disappeared.

"Come," said Jean. "And may God have pity

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on you if you fail to keep your word in all you have promised, M'sieur Philip Darcambal. For from this hour on you are Philip Darcambal, of Montreal, the husband of Josephine Adare, our beloved lady of the forests. Come, M'sieur!"

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CHAPTER NINE

WITHOUT another word Jean led the way to the door, which had partly closed after Josephine. For a moment he paused with his hand upon it, and then entered. Philip was close behind him. His first glance swept the room in search of the girl. She had disappeared with her two companions. For a moment he heard voices beyond a second door in front of him. Then there was silence.

In wonder he stared about him, and Jean did not interrupt his gaze. He stood in a great room whose walls were of logs and axe-hewn timbers. It was a room forty feet long by twenty in width, massive in its build, with walls and ceiling stained a deep brown. In one end was a fireplace large enough to hold a pile of logs six feet in length, and in this a small fire was smouldering. In the centre of the room was a long, massive table, its timber carved by the axe, and on this a lamp was burning. The floor was strewn with fur rugs, and on the walls hung the mounted

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heads of beasts. These things impressed themselves upon Philip first. It was as if he had stepped suddenly out of the world in which he was living into the ancient hall of a wild and half-savage thane whose bones had turned to dust centuries ago.

Not until Jean spoke to him, and led the way through the room, was this first impression swept back by his swift and closer observation of detail. About him extreme age was curiously blended with the modern. His breath stopped short when he saw in the shadow of the farther wall a piano, with a bronze lamp suspended from the ceiling above it. His eyes caught the shadowy outline of cases filled with books; he saw close to the fireplace wide, low-built divans covered with cushions; and over the door through which they passed hung a framed copy of da Vinci's masterpiece, "*La Joconde*," the Smiling Woman.

Into a dimly lighted hall he followed Jean, who paused a moment later before another door, which he opened. Philip waited while he struck a match and lighted a lamp. He knew at a glance that this was to be his sleeping apartment, and as he took in its ample comfort, the broad low bed behind its old-fashioned curtains, the easy chairs, the small table

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