

THE HEART OF CHERRY MCBAIN

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Title: The Heart of Cherry McBain

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Release Date: June 29, 2016 [eBook #52437]

Language: English

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MCBAIN ***

Produced by Al Haines.

THE HEART OF CHERRY MCBAIN

A Novel

BY
DOUGLAS DURKIN

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**THE HEART OF
CHERRY McBAIN****CHAPTER ONE**

Although it was late afternoon it was very hot—hot even for August. The horse ambled sleepily up the dusty trail, his head low and his eyes not more than half open. The rein hung loosely over his neck where it had been tossed by the rider who sat dozing in the saddle, his two hands folded across the pommel in front of him. The only alert member of the group, for there were three of these companions of the road, was the dog, a mongrel collie that trotted ahead with tongue hanging, or waited panting in the middle of the trail for the horse and rider to come up.

Suddenly the horse stumbled clumsily and the rider came to himself with a start.

”Steady up, you fool!” he said, and then, as if he regretted the tone in which he had spoken, he leaned forward slightly and passed his hand along the hot neck shining with sweat, and brushed away the big brown flies that clustered about the horse’s ears.

He picked up the rein and looked about him. A few yards ahead the trail dipped slowly away to the east in a long winding curve that circled the brow of a little hill. Bringing the horse to a stand, he turned and glanced behind him. To the west the trail fell away and lost itself in a wide valley out of which he had ridden during the afternoon. He got down from the saddle, and tossing the rein over the horse’s head to the ground, snapped his fingers to the dog and scrambled up the side of the little hill on his right to where a pile of tumbled tamaracs lay just as they had fallen during a fire that had scorched the hills a year or two before. In a minute he had clambered upon the topmost timber and stood hat in hand looking down into the valley.

As he stood there in the full light of the late afternoon sun anyone catching

a glimpse of him from a distance would have been impressed most with the bigness of the man. But with all his bigness he was not heavy-footed nor awkwardly poised. The ease with which he had sprung up the side of the hill, and had leaped from one fallen timber to another until he had reached the spot where he stood, was only possible where strong muscles are well co-ordinated and work together in perfect harmony. And yet as he drew himself up to his full height there was but little there that bespoke agility. He looked heavy except, perhaps, about the hips. His broad shoulders appeared too broad, partly because of the slight stoop forward that seemed to lengthen the line that marked the curve from shoulder to shoulder across the back. His face was the face of a youth—but of a youth grown serious. There was a set to the jaw that seemed to hint at a past in which grim determination had often been his sole resource, and there were lines about the mouth that told of hard living. His eyes were the eyes of a man who has wondered much about things—and was still wondering.

For it had occurred to King Howden—as it has probably occurred to every man sometime or other—that the game was not worth the candle. The significant thing about King's wondering, however, was the fact that it had gone on for months without leading to any other conclusion. In a little less than a month he would be twenty-eight, and he couldn't help feeling that life should be taking shape. Ten years ago, when he had struck out into the world alone, a serious-faced boy whose heart swelled at the prospect of living a great free life in the open places of the world, he had thought that by the time he reached twenty-eight he would have seen some of his dreams, at least, approaching realization. Now as he thought it over, he knew that he had failed, and the knowledge had a strange effect upon him.

Down there where the valley lay filled with the blue haze of late summer, a haze that was touched with silver from the sun—a little village stood hidden among the trees that lined the banks of a small creek that chattered noisily over its shingly bed. It was an odd kind of a village, that. To begin with it had no name. It was known simply as The Town, having sprung into being in a single season as the gathering place of the scores of new settlers from "the outside," the vanguard of the army of nation-builders, eager to secure desirable locations before the railroad should enter and link up the valley with the world at large. For months the settlers had gone in over a hill trail of a hundred and twenty-five miles or more. Gathering their equipment together, they had hitched their teams of sleepy-eyed oxen to prairie schooners and had poked toilsomely along for days over a trail that only the bravest hearts would ever have followed for its entire length. But the reward was a worthy one—a generous plot of virgin soil as fertile as anything the prairies of Western Canada could show.

And so the town had sprung into being at a spot chosen by the men who

had blazed the trail. There was a certain native beauty about the place, in its pretty stream that brought the cool, fresh water from the springs in the hills, and in the full-bosomed elms and rustling silver poplars and fragrant balm-o'-gilead that dappled with shadows the surface of the creek, and made a cool retreat for weary travellers coming in hot and dusty from the long trail. Some day—it could not be long now—the steel ribbons of one of Canada's great transcontinental railways would bind the village to the world that lay beyond the hills and then The Town would be no more. Its proud successor would rise up somewhere along the line, and the old place would be forgotten.

In the meantime the place had a distinctive existence of its own. In short—as is the manner with small towns the world over—it had a way with it. King Howden, who had been among the first to come, had watched it grow and had come to know it very well. He knew that, young though the village was, it had its secrets, and when a town talks behind its hand, someone must needs feel uneasy. King's face had grown grave on many occasions during his few months of life in this little frontier town. The villagers were evidently concerned about this big, slow-moving fellow who had nothing much to say to anyone, and who, after delivering his weekly bag of mail into the hands of old man Hurley, the kindly old Government Agent in the place, habitually beat a shy retreat to the little cabin he had built on a quarter section of land that lay west of the town.

And King's face was grave now as he shaded his eyes with one hand in an effort to pierce the haze and get a glimpse of the white tents and the roughly-built huts that stood down there among the trees.

He did not know exactly where he should look to find the town, for it was his first trip over a new trail that led from the railway construction camp to the town. Once every two weeks or so during the summer he had gone out by the long trail and returned with a bag of mail slung behind him. On those longer trips he had often perched himself upon some hill overlooking the valley and dreamed away an hour or so as he thought of the future—and of the past.

Now he was on a new trail. The "end-of-the-steel" had daily crept closer to the valley and at last he had been notified that future deliveries of mail for the settlement would be made at the railway supply camp at the end of the line.

King Howden had loitered during that summer afternoon, and the loitering was not all on account of the heat. There is romance in a new trail that has been freshly-blazed and newly-cleared, and King Howden—though he never would have admitted it even to himself—liked the romance that springs to meet one at every bend in a newly-made roadway.

On a bright day he might have seen the white tents and log cabins of The Town quite easily. But to-day it was quite hidden behind a smoky blue-white curtain that obscured everything beyond a radius of only a few miles.

"Too thick to-day, Sal," he said, addressing the dog as he prepared to get down.

At the sound of her name the dog edged up a little closer along the log and rubbed her nose affectionately against his knee. King smiled slowly and then, instead of getting down to the ground immediately, he squatted low and took the dog's ears in his hands.

"Sal, you old cuss," he said slowly, "look me in the eye. D'you remember the day I took you in? You common old purp, I saved your life when you were nothing but just plain, ornery pup. If I hadn't come along that day and given promises to take you away, gunnysack and all—splash!—you'd been a dead dog, Sal."

He turned the dog's head sideways as he spoke and thrust it downwards violently in imitation of what might have occurred early in the dog's history and so have terminated her career suddenly had he not happened along at the critical moment. The dog blinked her eyes and licked her jaws by way of reply.

"And a dead dog ain't worth speaking about, Sal," he continued. "But you're a sure 'nough live dog even if you are common stuff and not much account. And I like you, Sal,—sure, I like you. I like you for staying round. I like you because you don't squeal. If you were a squealer now—I'd shoot you in a minute."

He bent over and rubbed his head against the animal's face. Then he sprang up.

"Come on, you lazy old cuss, you," he exclaimed quickly. "Don't you know there's a long bit o' trail ahead yet? Come on!"

In a moment he was mounted again and on his way. About twenty miles of trail lay ahead of before he should come to the end of his journey. Although the afternoon was rapidly wearing away and the westering sun already turning red above the valley there was no special cause for hurry. King loved the trail in the long northern evenings when the scent of spruce and tamarac came down from the hills and mingled with the delicate perfume of the prairie roses that came up from the valley. He loved the changing colors deepening in the twilight. He loved to hear the night voices awakening one after another. Often he had taken the trail late in the evening in midsummer to escape the heat of the day and to watch the arc of daylight growing smaller as it shifted its way round to the north in the early night until it hung like the edge of a huge grey disc just showing above the northern-most point of the horizon. He had often watched the disc move eastward and grow again with the hours until it spread out into the glorious dawn of another day, and in his own way he loved it all—for it made him feel that he was a part of the great scheme of things. For a while then he felt sure of himself—and that was a good feeling for King Howden.

Only a few miles more and he would be out on the right-of-way where

stood old Keith McBain's construction camp. It made a convenient place for a pause half-way in the trip, and the camp incidentally boasted the best cook on the line—a fact that might have had some bearing upon King's decision to make camp about supper time.

A short three miles farther on, the trail took a little dip to the left down the slope of a wooded ridge and emerged upon the open right-of-way. It was within half an hour of general quitting time and the teamsters had already begun to leave the grade, their sweating horses hurrying quickly away in the dust, with trace-chains clinking and harness rattling. The rest of the gang were still at work clearing the ground of stumps and logs, and roughly levelling the piles of earth that had been thrown up by the "slushers" during the afternoon.

King had stood upon right-of-ways before, but the prospect fascinated him as much to-day as it had done the first day he had ever looked along the narrowing perspective of an open avenue canyoned between two rows of trees, and in the centre a long straight line of grey-brown earth heaped up into a grade. He slipped down from the saddle and walked leisurely along the trail that skirted the side of the right-of-way, his eyes upon the men who went about their work quietly and with no more enthusiasm than one might expect from human beings whose thanks to a benevolent Providence found daily expression in the formula, "another day, another dollar."

King found a bit of innocent diversion in the efforts of four grunting and expostulating workmen who had lifted a log from the ground and were stumbling clumsily with it towards the right-of-way. The log was not so large that four men could not have handled it easily. King smiled as he watched them, and thought to himself that two men could have picked it up and taken it away without great effort. Suddenly a veritable torrent of profanity broke upon his ears, and the foreman who had been standing near rushed up, threw his arms about the log and scattering all four of them, carried it off alone and threw it upon a pile of stumps and roots that stood a few feet back from the trail. King found himself all at once wondering what he himself could have done with a log of the same size.

He came to himself suddenly again at the sound of the foreman's voice and looked round just in time to see Sal leap to one side and run towards him to escape a stick that came hurtling along the ground near the dog's feet. King stepped out quickly to protect the dog. As he did so he saw the foreman standing a few yards away, his face twisted into a grin. For a moment the two men eyed each other. Then King spoke.

"Quit that," he said in a voice that trembled with rising passion.

The foreman's only reply was a few muttered words of profanity that King did not hear, or hearing did not consider worthy of any account. His concern was for the mongrel collie that had narrowly escaped injury, and was now fawning

and whining about his legs.

"Don't do that," he said. "She's my dog."

The foreman grinned. "Your dog—what the devil do I care whose dog it is!"

King spoke without moving and his voice was now clear and steady. "You don't need to care—you didn't hit her."

"Well, I tried, didn't I?"

"I say you didn't hit her," King replied slowly, "and I—I don't want you to."

For a moment the two men stood looking at each other silently without moving. King's face was grave and one corner of his mouth twitched a little in anger. The grin never left the face of the foreman; it was still there when he finally turned away and strode towards the men who were at work on the grade a short distance off.

King watched him closely for a while and then stepped back and passed his hand soothingly along the horse's shoulder. Getting down on one knee he drew the dog towards him and patted her head gently.

"Sal, you old mongrel pup, you," he said as if he were on the point of bringing gentle chastisement upon her—but he said no more. Getting up, he threw a backward glance in the direction of the men working on the grade and went on slowly down the trail towards the camp.

When he had gone some distance he stopped suddenly and looked about him as if he feared someone were watching him. On the ground before him was a large, solid tamarac log. He placed his foot upon it and measured it with his eyes from end to end. He kicked the log two or three times to assure himself that it was sound. Then he glanced back again to where the men were working in the distance. When he was sure that no one was watching him he dropped the bridle rein to the ground and bent over the log. Working his great hands under it he closed his arms slowly about the middle and set himself to lift. Gradually he straightened himself till he stood erect, his arms clasped about the log. Then swinging it round till he faced in the opposite direction he carried it steadily to the other side of the trail and dropped it in the underbrush. Measuring it again with his eyes, he kicked it—it was sound to the heart.

"I can do it," he said aloud to himself, "and I believe—if anything—it's a bigger piece."

Even as he spoke he became aware of someone watching him. Something suspiciously like a chuckle came from the bushes near by and he raised his eyes quickly. Not more than a dozen paces away, half-hidden in the shrubbery, stood a girl knee-deep in the matted vines, a sheaf of wild roses in her arms.

For a moment King was unable to stir. It was as if an apparition had suddenly broken in on his imagination—a riotous apparition of dark hair, laughing eyes and delicate pink roses.

When he came to himself he moved back awkwardly and was in the act of lifting the bridle-rein when he was arrested by a burst of laughter that caused him to turn again and stand looking at her, the bridle-rein hanging loosely in his hand. His look was a question—and her only answer was a laugh as she came out from the cover of the bushes and stood upon the log that King had just moved from the other side of the trail. From this position of advantage she looked at him, her eyes almost on a level with his.

"I saw it all," she declared, and King thought the expression on her face was less mischievous now.

"What?" he asked.

"You take a dare from a man and walk away to have it out by yourself with a log."

There was a flash of fire in her eyes as she spoke and King became the victim of mingled anger and self-reproach. While he hesitated to make a reply the girl hopped down from the log and, brushing past him, walked quickly down the trail towards the camp.

When she had gone almost out of easy hearing distance he straightened himself suddenly.

"I didn't!" he called after her, but she paid not the slightest heed.

A minute later he started off for the camp afoot, his horse following behind him. And as he went he thought over the words in which he found nothing but reproach, and worst of all—contempt.

"You took a dare," he repeated, and then to himself he said over and over again, "I didn't—I didn't!"

CHAPTER TWO

A little more than an hour later King left the cook-camp and went to the corral where his horse, well rested from the first half of the journey, stood ready and waiting for him.

He was in the act of throwing the saddle onto the horse when he stopped suddenly and listened. From round the corner of the corral came the sound of voices of men in dispute.

"Any man who tries to call Bill McCartney had better be sure he holds a good hand," the most emphatic of the speakers declared.

In affairs of this kind King Howden had a kind of instinct that he invariably trusted. Something told him that the man whose name he heard was the big foreman whom he had seen on the grade before supper. He felt, too, that he himself was under discussion, and laying the saddle down he walked quietly to the corner and listened for a moment. He had no liking for eavesdropping, and yet—he had not recovered from the sting of the words that had fallen from the lips of the girl; the look of reproach in her dark eyes was still vividly before him. But those words were the words of a girl. When men speak disparagingly of another, the case is a different one.

He stepped round the corner of the corral and stood before a half dozen of McBain's men lounging upon bales of pressed hay, smoking after-supper pipes.

For a moment there was a silence so tense that even King, who might have been prepared for it, began to feel uncomfortable.

"No use bluffin'," said one of the group at last. "We were talkin' about you an' Bill McCartney. Looked for a while like someone was in for a lickin' this afternoon."

King looked at the speaker. He was an old man, too old, really, to be combatting the rigors of camp life. His voice was thin, even high-pitched, but King could not help observing the very apparent effort the old man was making to be pleasant. And yet, the line where King's lips met drew straight and tightened perceptibly.

"My boy," the old man went on, very pleasantly but not patronizingly, "don't bother Bill McCartney. We don't love him none—but we talk when he ain't 'round." He was speaking very directly now and had begun to fill his pipe deliberately. "The boys can tell you about him. There's a hardy youngster here in camp by the name of Lush Currie—"

The old man was interrupted suddenly by the laughter of the other members of the group. At first he seemed ready to join in the chorus he had unwittingly provoked, but he glanced once at King and checked himself immediately. Then he turned to the men with a look in which there was a mingling of anger and appeal.

"Well," he said abruptly, "what are you laughin' at?"

If the remark relieved the old man's embarrassment it certainly did not check the hilarity of the men. But when King stepped forward and looked at them with a slow smile playing about the corners of his lips and drawing the lines of his mouth even more tensely, the laughing ceased at once and the men waited in silence for him to speak.

"Don't you go to making plans for me and this man, McCartney," King said, and his steady gaze seemed to take them all in at once as he spoke. "You better get straight on this—McCartney hasn't done me a speck o' harm—not yet he hasn't."

"Pray goddlemighty hard he don't!" replied one of the men, but the remark elicited scarcely more than a smile from the others—and not even so much as a smile from the old man.

"And I'm not going to lose time praying about it, either," King observed, his eyes upon the speaker.

He turned and went back to his horse, where he proceeded in a leisurely way to adjust the saddle. In a few minutes he was ready to leave, and was on the point of getting up when he heard a step approaching, and pausing to look behind him observed the old man coming round the corner of the corral. He was alone, and as he came forward he took his pipe from his mouth and tapped the bowl gently against the palm of his hand to empty it.

"My name's Gabe Smith," he said in his high, thin voice, "an' yours?"

King gave him his name.

The old man extended his hand cordially, and King, recognizing at once that the overtures were meant to be friendly, could not help feeling warmly towards him. They exchanged a few words that served to confirm King's opinion of the sincerity of old Gabe Smith, and then, getting into his saddle, King turned his horse's head down the trail.

Just once before he urged his horse into a gallop he turned and looked behind him.

"Sal, you!" he called to his dog.

At the summons the dog leaped from the side of the trail and the three went off together in the gathering dusk.

It was, perhaps, only natural that King's mind should dwell more or less upon the disturbing element that, during the past few hours, had come unbidden into his life. Early that afternoon his mind had been occupied mainly with memories of a past that had been woven out of failure and disappointment and shapeless motive. Now, with an open trail before him, his mind was filled with new hopes and strange misgivings.

His misgivings were not without good reason, had he known the full truth. Bill McCartney, the big foreman with Keith McBain's outfit, commanded the respect which hard-fisted men invariably pay to those whose reputation for heavy hitting goes before them wherever they move. When he came to Keith McBain's camp his reputation had preceded him by at least a week. By some mysterious way, for which there is no accounting, the men had been prepared for days against the coming of one who could hit harder than any man west of North Bay. It was not on record that any of the citizens of the town that set the eastern limit to the extent of McCartney's reputation could actually hit harder, or even as hard, as the formidable foreman. It probably never occurred to anyone to carry his investigations so far. It was enough that North Bay should be generally accepted

as the point that marked the division between two worlds, in one of which the name of Bill McCartney had never been known, in the other of which his name was mentioned with the deference due to men of his class.

There was probably no fear mingled with that feeling of deference. The men simply knew what Bill McCartney's reputation was, and after the first few searching glances at the new foreman they were prepared to believe what they had been told, and, perhaps, to add something to it by way of coloring it up a little.

Those who were disposed to think conservatively of McCartney's abilities when they first saw him were given an opportunity to correct their estimates somewhere about the third day after his arrival in camp, although only a few were fortunate enough to be on hand when he first proved his ability to live up to his reputation. Before McCartney's arrival the name of "Lush" Currie, a thick-set, bony fellow who had carried off the honors in many a fight to the finish, had always been mentioned with something of the same deference that was now accorded the new foreman. In fact, Currie was one of the few doubters who were unwise enough to have expressed openly their own personal contempt for reputations that were unproved. He spoke once, however, when McCartney was within hearing. The small group who had witnessed the affair afterwards said that "Lush" had spoken very unwisely. No one at the time knew exactly what had occurred—though they worked out all the details with great care later. All agreed that only one blow had been struck, and that blow was McCartney's. Before Currie had a chance to defend himself he was lying in a heap on the ground. Though McCartney waited for him to get up, "Lush" could not find his feet without the help of a couple of men who were standing near, who lifted him and helped him off to his bunk, where for a few days he nursed a broken jaw.

The incident had caused no end of discussion. Some felt that Currie had not been given a square deal—there was such a thing as a fair fight—Currie should have been given some warning. The affair proved nothing so far as Bill McCartney's fighting ability was concerned; it should be fought over again, and undoubtedly would. Others protested that Currie had no right to talk about McCartney unless he wanted to fight—that he should have been prepared for what had happened. He had been warned—he got only what was coming to him, and would probably know better than to seek further trouble.

But "Lush" Currie gave neither promise nor explanation—a fact that, in the opinion of the great majority of Keith McBain's men, proved his wisdom, if it did not add anything to his reputation for courage.

But these were things that King did not know. He only wondered about the man McCartney, in whom he found—though he could not have told why—the embodiment of a new and sinister antagonism. He could not help feeling that

somehow powers over which he had no control were dealing the cards, and he had to play the game.

Had it not been for the fact that another—

His mind went back to the laughing eyes of the girl that had spoken to him from the cover of the bushes beside the trail.

Overhead the night-hawks whistled and swooped down with whirring wings above the tree-tops. The damp scent of low mist-filled hollows came to him on the motionless air, mingled with the cool fresh fragrance of the spruce. Little waves of warm air rose from the trail that had lain all day under a burning sky. The occasional call of a distant coyote whined across the plains, and returned in numberless echoes till it broke and died into silence.

Suddenly Sal stopped in the trail and stood looking back, her head up, her ears pricked forward, her tail brushing from side to side. King reined his horse in to a walk and listened. He could hear the rhythmic beat of hoofs on the trail some distance behind him. From the sound they made he knew the rider was coming fast. Curiosity overcame him, and he turned about and waited at a point in the trail from which he could look from cover across a deep hollow to where the trail was visible winding along near the base of the hill. He had been waiting only a few moments when the horse and rider came into view. The light had almost gone by now, but there was still enough left of the long northern summer twilight to make it possible for him to follow the dimly-outlined figures of horse and rider until they suddenly vanished where the trail ran hidden through a stretch of evergreens. When they emerged they were only a few yards away and in full sight. The rider was none other than the girl whose image he had kept before him in the failing twilight.

His first impulse was to turn his horse's head across the trail—he could not believe that the girl he had seen that afternoon was actually in control of the animal she rode. But not more than a dozen paces away the horse planted his feet before him suddenly, stopped with a jerk, and rose on his hind legs. Then with front feet still in the air he pivoted round and bolted away in the opposite direction. King was amazed to see the girl keep her seat, but his amazement increased when, just before reaching the turn, the horse stopped suddenly as he had done before, and wheeling about came up the trail towards him again at the same wild pace. King stood aside this time and caught a glimpse of the girl's face as she shot past him. The expression he saw there was enough to dispel any fears that he might have entertained for her safety. A few yards down the trail the horse turned again, and he saw the girl strike him across the nose with her quirt.

Then for fully ten minutes he watched a battle royal between a slender girl and a horse whose spirit had never been broken. He had seen men breaking

horses to the saddle, and he had thrilled to the excitement of it. But this fight was different. The girl who held her seat in the battle that was being fought out before him did her work fearlessly, firmly, and without speaking a word, and King took off his hat and sat watching in silence.

Back and forth they went on the trail, the horse leaping and rearing at the turns, the girl wearing him down gradually with sharp strokes of her quirt across the nose. The horse shook his head at every stroke and came back after each turn with as much apparent determination as ever. The girl kept her place without a smile, her eyes steadily before her, intent on every move.

The end came suddenly. A quick stroke caught the animal just as his front feet were about to leave the ground, and he stood quivering in every limb, champing his bit and shaking his head in an effort to slacken the bridle rein that the girl held firmly in her hand. Then as he stood, trembling and subdued, the girl spoke for the first time, and turning him slowly round brought him down the trail at a walk.

King wanted to cry out in admiration of the superb manner in which the girl had conducted herself in the struggle, but when she came to where he stood she brought her horse to a standstill and turned to him with a smile—and King was dumb.

Women had never been a concern of King Howden's. He had never been able to quite understand their ways, and he had come to the conclusion that if success in life depended upon a man's ability to succeed with women—and he had known many who had advanced such a theory in all seriousness—then nothing in the world was more inevitable than that he should fail, and fail miserably, sooner or later. He had avoided women generally, and for years had deliberately sought for conditions of living in which he could reasonably hope for a chance to make good without them.

But here was a woman no man could avoid. In one slow glance again he noted the lightning that played in her dark eyes; he caught the wild witchery of her tumbled hair and the beauty of her cheeks, flushed from the excitement of the fight she had just won, and he lost himself in contemplation of the smile that lent an indescribable sweetness to her firm mouth. She was dressed plainly—even roughly—in a waist that revealed the soft whiteness of her neck and throat and the firm round curve of her shoulders and breast, and in a skirt that clung closely to her limbs. But of these things King Howden was only vaguely conscious. He could not take his eyes from her face, with its strange contradiction of flashing eyes and gently smiling mouth.

The girl was the first to speak.

"You must have been riding hard," she said. "I thought I'd never catch up with you."

"Catch up?" King thought to himself, and was at a loss to understand.

"Come on," she said quickly, and before he was able to reply, "I'm going to ride a little way with you."

She drew her rein back, pulled her horse about, touched him lightly on the flank with her quirt, and was off at an easy canter along the trail, leaving King to follow or not as he pleased. With a slow smile of recognition of the somewhat anomalous position he was in, he turned into the trail and rode after her.

When he came up with her he drew his horse in a little and together they rode for the next half hour through little valleys and over gently rounding hills dimly outlined in the failing twilight.

Here and there a rabbit started up in the trail before them and ran its foolish frightened race ahead of them until the dog came and put it to cover in the low underbrush beside the roadway. Occasionally a partridge or a prairie chicken got up suddenly from its dust bath in the middle of the trail and hurried off with much clucking and beating of the wings. Once a coyote stood with pricked ears before them on the trail until the sight of Sal sent him off with a lazy, half defiant lope to a little knoll, where he perched himself and waited while they rode past. They caught the delicate aroma of dew on the grass, and brushed a warm fragrance from the foliage as they swept close to where the trees leaned a little over the trail. Frequently they splashed through little hurrying streams where the cold water ran only a few inches deep, or rode through low meadows where the mist lay like white shrouds and settled lightly above the long grass that carpeted the hollows. And behind them the sky had deepened to a blood-red hue with long ribbons of pale gold stretching along the horizon already far to the north of where the sun had gone down.

They had rounded the brow of a hill and had come out of cover to a point in the trail where it afforded them a wide outlook across a meadowy valley. The girl brought her horse to a stand and King reined in beside her.

"I like this," she said, waving her hand toward the valley.

King looked at her, but she had not so much as turned her head towards him. For the first time he was able to look at her without embarrassment. He was no artist to analyze the fine points of symmetry in face and figure. But he was a man—and the man in him told him that she was beautiful. What he liked best about her was the strength of her beauty. He knew at a glance that she was not of the delicate, clinging kind that practise a languid air and never forget their sex. Here was a girl whose heart-beat was strong with the confidence and the reliance she had learned to place in herself—and every line of her face, every movement of her body, bore evidence to the fact. And yet, as she sat and looked out over the valley half hidden under the mists, there was a soft warmth in her dark eyes that made her presence luminous. For King the girl who sat before him embodied in

tangible form, it seemed, all he had ever aspired to, all he had ever even vaguely dreamed of.

Her voice, when she spoke, was not the voice of reproach that she had used earlier in the afternoon. Now it was soft, quiet, even deep.

"I like it, too," he said, in response to her simple expression of admiration for what lay before them. "But you haven't come all this way for that"—he waved his hand gently in the direction of the valley.

She turned to him quickly. "No—I have seen it before—though I don't remember when it was ever so beautiful."

"Nor I," thought King, though he kept his thoughts to himself.

"What is your name?" she asked suddenly and with a directness that brought a smile to King's face.

He told her.

"And I am Cherry McBain—my father is Keith McBain—'Old Silent,' the men call him," she replied. "I came to tell you that I need your help—not for me—for my father."

King looked at her strangely. "But a man," he said slowly, "a man who takes a dare—"

"Don't be silly!" she broke in suddenly. "I only half believed that."

"Don't you think that's bad enough?" replied King.

"Can you fight?" asked the girl abruptly, disregarding his reply.

The smile that had rested upon King's face during the conversation vanished all at once before the old grave look that was habitual with him. He did not answer at once—he turned the question over and over again in his mind.

"Cherry McBain," he said at last, "I'm not used to women—and women's ways." His eyes were looking off across the valley when he spoke, and his voice was like that of a man speaking to himself. "I've known some women—a few—but no woman ever asked me if I could fight—only once—but she was a foolish woman—she wasn't good. No good woman ever asked me that before."

He turned his face towards her slowly and looked at her with searching eyes.

"But you," he said hesitatingly, "you're good, Cherry McBain."

He was silent as he looked at her now, and his lips tightened before he spoke again. "Years ago," he said at last, "I fought, and the man I struck—we were boys then—was a brother. I was not myself—I struck him in anger. When I understood what I had done I left him—left my home and all—and came west. That was ten years ago. I wrote him a letter and he asked me to come back. He said he had forgotten—but I—I could never go back."

"Do you think that's silly too?"

She shook her head.

"I have not hit any man since that day," he said with emphasis. "I can fight—I would fight—quicker for a good woman than anything else."

Cherry McBain held out her hand to him. "I needn't have asked you that," she said. "I didn't know. But promise me that you will come and see my father when you are on your way back—old Gabe has told me you are carrying the mail for the settlement."

King pressed her hand gently.

"I guess I'll come," he said.

A smile brightened the girl's face.

"Come," she said. "We'll have raspberries for tea."

"If it rains wildcats," he declared as he released her hand.

"To-morrow afternoon, then," she said, and the next moment she was gone.

King stood and watched her, hat in hand, until she had vanished from his sight. When the beat of the hoofs on the hard trail was no longer audible he shook his horse's bridle gently and resumed his way.

King did not cease to think of his brother when the last sound of hoof-beats had died in the distance. His conversation with Cherry McBain had started in his mind a train of thought that he could not control.

As long as King could remember, his best friend in all the world, the one he had loved the most—even during that one mad regrettable moment of passion—was his younger brother, Dick. As boys at home in eastern Canada, Dick had always been the lucky one—King's pranks had always been discovered. In the ten long years that had elapsed since King had struck west in shame and humiliation, it was the thought of having left Dick that weighed most heavily upon him. It was the memory of Dick's laughing face that had made his heart burn with remorse whenever he remembered how weak, how foolish he had been. During those ten years his heart had quailed before one fear only—the fear that something might happen to Dick before he could see him again.

And now as he rode alone over the trail that was all but hidden in the heavy dusk, this fear had gripped his heart so fiercely that he was helpless to shake himself free. A nameless dread, a pressing sadness brooded over him. He was seized with a sense of utter loneliness.

Some will say that there is no such thing as presentiment. But when King Howden reached the end-of-the-steel that night and found among the mail a letter for himself announcing the death of his brother, Dick Howden, he was convinced, whether reasonably or not, that voices had spoken to him out of the silence—had been speaking to him, indeed, for years, if he had only heard and tried to understand.

King knew no rest that night. Early in the morning he left the bunkhouse where he had been lying during the night and went out into the open where the

light of another day was growing in an eastern sky all rose and gold. He found a path leading into the woods and followed it for some distance among the trees to a spot where it led across a little stream. Here he sat down and for a long time looked at the water and the trees and the changing colors of the sky.

When the red sun pushed its way at last above the tree-tops, there came the sound of men stirring in the camp, and the distant sharp rattle of the wheels of a wagon bumping along over a rough trail. A new day had begun—a day when strong men would go out to work, singing and bantering as they went.

King got up from his place beside the stream and stood with his face to the east. Slowly he lifted his right hand and closed his fingers. Then he laid his left hand over it.

In the east the day was springing.

In his heart there was a prayer—a prayer such as big men speak when they have seen the wrong they have done. And who shall say that the prayer was not heard?

In his face there was a resolve—a resolve that expressed itself in the tightening of the fingers that closed over his right hand. And who shall say that the resolve was not recorded?

CHAPTER THREE

In a country where women are seldom seen, the presence of a pretty girl of twenty-one is a matter worthy of record—even if she is the daughter of a railway construction boss. For Keith McBain, reticent, profane to a frankly amazing degree on those rare occasions when he did speak to his men, was a seasoned old man of his class. Silent and unapproachable—as is the manner of camp bosses—Keith McBain seemed at times the least human of them all. "Old Silent" the men called him, partly on account of an instinctive grudge they all bore him for his mode of hard dealing, and partly, too, on account of a kind of unreasoned affection which they cherished for him because of his rough-handed honesty and his indomitable will. When Old Silent spoke no man spoke back. Not that he was a man to fear physically—he was a small, dyspeptic, nervous man whom anyone of his deep-chested camp-followers could have brushed aside with one hand. It was rather the man's face that they feared, with its black piercing eyes that never shifted their glance when he spoke, and its black sardonic smile that

made an impenetrable mask for a soul that no man had ever seen revealed. His men all feared him—some of them hated him—and yet they never left him, once their names had been placed on the pay-roll.

Once only in the memory of those who worked for him had the hope ever arisen that the old contractor's manner might soften and his hard face relax in the presence of the men. Just a year ago, nearly a hundred miles back along the line, Keith McBain had lost his wife after a long illness. She had lingered for weeks in a pathetic fight for life, and the old camp boss had watched by her bedside almost continuously, leaving the oversight of the work wholly in the hands of his foremen. Never had a gang of men worked so hard as those men had worked day after day while Old Silent was absent from his place, not only out of deference to the frail woman who was struggling gamely against too great odds, but out of sheer respect for their old boss whose burden of sorrow was daily growing heavier. And when at last the word came that the struggle was over, the men had sat about very late into the night and had spoken in whispers. Keith McBain had made the grave with his own hands, just off the right-of-way, and had marked the spot with a pile of stones and a rough-hewn cross. Then in the days that followed he had been more silent than ever, more unremitting in his dealing with the men, and, if possible, more profane. And yet every last one of his men could not help knowing that Keith McBain's heart was breaking. His light had burned late into the night—and every night—for months following the day that had brought him his great sorrow.

Cherry McBain had come unannounced into the camp. In fact the men had not known of her existence until she rode into camp one afternoon a couple of weeks before the death of Mrs. McBain. Only a few of the more fortunate among them had had a glimpse of her as she came up the trail escorted by McBain's timekeeper, who had gone out to meet her and bring her to the camp. But the few that had seen her knew at once that she was the daughter of the woman who was dying in Keith McBain's cabin—so striking was the resemblance between mother and daughter.

During the days that immediately followed her arrival Cherry was never seen abroad except late in the evenings when she walked out with her father and came back with her arms laden with wild flowers and fern. But when Keith McBain turned again to resume his duties after the darkest episode of his life had been closed, Cherry McBain wandered alone along the new grade or saddled her horse and explored the trails wherever they led in both directions from the camp.

Men who work a whole season in the woods or on a right-of-way, and at the end of the season fling their total earnings away in one hilarious week or two in the nearest city, are likely to classify women roughly and perhaps quickly, even if for ten months out of every twelve they never hear the sound of a woman's voice.

They may sometimes make errors in their classifications, but not often. The first morning that Cherry McBain strolled along the edge of the works and paused here and there to watch the men as they swung their teams round in the ever moving circle that carried the earth away from both sides of the right-of-way to the centre where it was graded up into the first rough form of a road-bed—that morning the men registered their own judgments concerning the daughter of Old Silent. In her dark eyes there was the fearless look of her father, the look that pierced through the surface and saw through the veneer to what lay behind. In her smile there was the essence of her mother's gentle nature—a nature before which men down through the centuries have bowed in silent worship.

But there was something more, something that was her own. Men saw it in her lightning glance and in the quick toss she gave her head when she shook back her wind-blown, dark-brown hair. Not one of the men had been able to tell exactly what it was that was there, but all alike were convinced that while Keith McBain might command obedience in his men and squelch even his foreman with a look or an explosive word or two, he had no look that could have served him in a contest with the will of Cherry McBain.

It was six o'clock by the time King reached McBain's camp on his return trip. In the distance he saw the men leaving the grade and making their way towards the camp, the sound of their voices coming to him with heartening effect after his long silent trip, during which his mind had gone back irresistibly to the days when he and his brother had romped together as boys.

When he came to where the path led from the trail to McBain's cabin he turned abruptly, and getting down from the saddle allowed his horse to follow him while he made his way on foot along the narrow path. The little cabin was built of logs and stood well back from the trail, in the protecting shade of a clump of tamaracs.

Keith McBain was sitting by the doorway, his pipe in his mouth, his eyes turned to the hills that rose up, scraggly and covered with fallen and charred timbers, to the south of the cabin.

King's first feeling was one of pity. The old man who sat there smoking his pipe and musing was a broken man, and every line on his face showed it. There was in his eyes the look of a man whose power of will was almost gone. There was a look of fear in them, a fear lest he should reveal his weakness to others. He had an odd trick of glancing quickly about him as if he wished to assure himself that no one was coming upon him unannounced. His mouth was tight-lipped, his face covered with a short-clipped beard that once had been black but now showed gray and pale against the bloodless cheeks.

And yet, for all the face showed of weakness, King was at once struck by the intensity and the unswerving directness of his gaze when Keith McBain turned to look at him. At first there seemed to be a shadow of suspicion in the grizzled old face, but King could not help observing the slow change to something almost kindly that showed deep in the old man's eyes as he got up and extended his hand.

"Come and sit down," he said. "The girl told me you were coming. She's off somewhere in the hills after berries—come and sit down."

When they had talked a little King was so much moved by the note of pathos that crept into the voice of Keith McBain that he determined at once to share with him the news that he had received only the night before. Evidently Old Silent was in a pensive mood, and King inwardly longed for someone to whom he could speak concerning what had lain heavily on his heart all day.

For a long time after King had spoken, Keith McBain sat without uttering a word.

"Aye, boy, you've suffered a great loss," he said at last, and his gaze was straight before him towards the hill-tops in the distance. As he continued he seemed to be talking to himself rather than to King. "It's hard for men to know what a thing like this means until they have tasted it themselves. For years I have gone out in the morning with men when the light was scarce showing through the swamp and have come in again at night tired after the work of the day to sleep—and make ready for the next day. And I've watched them—all ready for the 'roll out' when the call came at daybreak. And I've marvelled at their punctuality—and their willingness. And then a day would come when one of them wouldn't be in his place. He'd heard the call but couldn't go out. And later—perhaps a few days just—he didn't hear it—and the rest of us were quieter for a while—a little less given to talking; and then things went on very much as usual and we forgot. It's very good to forget."

King was pleased with the complete freedom from restraint that now marked the old man's manner. He talked well, with the merest trace of Scotch accent recognizable in the way he rolled his r's. He paused a moment and King made no attempt to interrupt. Finally he began again.

"Aye—it's good to forget—when you can. But there are times when a man can't forget—not altogether. You and I know that, my boy—we know it too well. And we won't talk about it either—except to mention it in passing. And in passing I want to say that I am very sorry. Where's the use trying to say more—a man can't."

He tapped his pipe gently against his hand and went leisurely about the task of filling it again.

"A straight man—and a clean man," he said gently, "is a rare enough article.

As men go, I haven't seen many that could answer to that description. The world is full of good women, my boy—I've seen a few they told me weren't straight and weren't clean, but I've never known any such myself—though I've known a lot of women, too. But the men I've known—”

He paused as if in contemplation of how he should express most effectively what was on his mind. In the interval of silence there was a sound of excited voices and hurried footsteps coming down the path towards the cabin. Looking up King recognized the two men approaching as the camp cook and his assistant. Their differences had apparently reached a head, and they were coming to thresh the matter out before the boss.

In an instant Keith McBain was himself again. Leaping up before the men had come within speaking distance he met them in the pathway and fell upon them with a flow of profanity that not only reduced the two to impotent silence but sent them back along the pathway and up the trail to the camp, the picture of mute dejection and defeat.

When the old contractor returned and took his seat again, he lighted his pipe in bad mood and puffed at it vigorously without speaking a word. It required only a glance at his face to realize that a change had come over him. Keith McBain was Old Silent again and nothing would bring him out of his surly mood.

King got up slowly and started down the footpath that led to the hills back of the cabin. Somewhere back in the shambles of pitched timbers and broken tree-trunks was Cherry McBain. When he came finally to where the path was so dimly marked that he could follow it no farther he climbed to the top of a little knoll and looked in every direction along the face of the hill to see if Cherry were anywhere in sight. Finally, when he had looked for some time in vain, he called and waited until the echoes died away in silence. There was no reply. Getting down from the knoll he scrambled further up the hill. He had seen a patch of grey ground away to the west where the fires of the year before had swept the hills clear of vegetation. In ten minutes he emerged from the cover of the evergreens and looked across the tangled mass of half-burned and fallen timbers. The climb had not been an easy one, and it was only with slight hope that he gave his call again and stood tense and motionless as he listened for a reply. From every side the echoes came back and gradually died away in faint waves that finally settled into stillness. He was about to turn back again and make for the camp, but just once more he called and waited.

Almost immediately and from a surprisingly short distance away Cherry's voice came clear to him across the patch of grey. Turning at once in the direction of the voice he looked and saw her waving her hand to him. In a few moments he was beside her, where she was seated on the ground picking twigs and leaves out of the small pail of berries she held in her lap. She looked up at him and laughed

roguishly, then offered him a large red berry which she held up to him between stained finger and thumb.

"Didn't you hear me call the first time?" he asked her.

She dropped her eyes and seemed very intent upon rolling the berries about in a vain search for more leaves. He waited for her answer. Ordinarily he would not have asked the question seriously. Even now he had no thought of accusing her. When she finally spoke he was at a loss to know what was in her mind.

"I—heard—you," she said, very slowly, and the tone of her voice was strange to King.

He waited, not knowing what to say in return, and hoping, too, that she might say something without his prompting her. When he saw that she was not going to speak, he asked another question as directly as he had asked the first.

"Why didn't you answer?"

The next moment he wished with all his heart that he had not spoken. The look she gave him was one in which appeal and disappointment were so deeply mingled that he cursed himself inwardly for his own clumsiness.

"Don't ask me why," she said. Then as she saw the grave look in King's eyes she got up and placed her hand on his arm. "Oh, it has nothing to do with you," she said in a voice that was all softness. "I—I didn't know at first that—that it was you."

Suddenly her manner changed.

"Let's go down now," she said quickly, picking up her pail of berries. "We're going to have tea."

Almost as she spoke the words she was off down the hill at a pace that made King exert himself to keep up with her. She ran along the smooth round timbers and leaped from one to another of the fallen logs so lightly and gracefully that King was put to it to save himself from being completely outstripped. She carried her berries in one hand and her hat in the other, and her hair, blown loose by the breeze, shone in the sunlight—transparent gold against a mass of black.

As he watched her, something of the wonder of their first meeting came back to him. He had never seen a girl so lithe, so wild, so beautiful. There was exultation in her every movement, and her laugh rippled musically as she leaped and climbed and ran along over the most difficult ground. Sometimes she looked back at him as if to make sure that he was following, and he saw her face radiant with life and youth. Once she waited till he came up to her before venturing along a dizzy bit of footing that required care in passing. When he came to her she placed her hand in his and together they went on.

From the look she gave him he scarcely knew whether she wanted help herself or wished to help him. But the clasp of her hand was so firm, so throbbing with vitality, that he wished he might still hold those fingers closed within

his own after they had come to level footing. The thought of it sent the blood coursing through his veins, and an impulse started up within him—an impulse that came out of the very depths of his being and made him forget for the time being everything in the world except this moment on a wild hillside with beauty and grace and youth within his reach.

When they reached the evergreens Cherry bounded ahead and left him to follow. The ground was level and soft underfoot and carpeted with cones and needles. Once she stopped suddenly in a little space open to the sky, and stooping down picked a wildflower and held it up to him.

"Not often you find them growing in a place so sheltered as this," she remarked as she gave him the flower.

He took it and looked from the flower, pure, white and soft, to her face. Unconsciously his gaze shifted to her throat, as pure and white and soft as the flower he held in his hand. Then she turned quickly and hurried off again into the cover of the evergreens.

Once she stopped so suddenly and turned so unexpectedly to meet him that he had almost run into her before he could check himself. Then as he stood in questioning attitude she shook her hair back from her face and with a ripple of a laugh was away again before he could speak.

As King followed her an unpleasant thought came suddenly to him. There was one thing he had always dreaded in women. He had never been quite unconscious of the subtle power they exerted—but he had always been suspicious of their motives. There was something so free, so healthful, so simple in Cherry's manner that he was almost disarmed of suspicion. And yet she was so coy, so wilful, so roguish that instinctively he felt himself assuming the defensive—a defensive, too, against himself and the impulses that arose within him and clamored for expression.

Suddenly she stopped and looked down at a small pool of cool fresh water fed from a little spring that bubbled out of the earth just a few yards away. A half dozen large stones lay touching the edge of the water, and before King realized what she was about, she had dropped her berries and hat and was on her knees with her two hands resting on a small boulder, her lips touching the surface of the water. As he looked at her he could not help thinking what a child she was—and how very much older he was. Nor could he think it any less when in a moment she raised her head and glanced up at him with a rare flush in her cheeks.

"Oh, this is good," she cried. "Look—there's a stone for you!"

He smiled slowly, but her spirit was irresistible. He got down beside her, his hands upon a boulder almost touching the stone upon which she was leaning for support.

When they had both drunk from the pool, instead of getting up immedi-

ately, they remained where they were, their hands upon the boulders, their eyes fixed upon the smooth surface of the water beneath them. For a moment only they looked, a moment in which both felt a power like a spell that held them gazing into the far depths that lay mirrored in the quiet pool. They were gazing like two children deep down into the depths of the blue skies reflected far below where the white clouds floated beyond the downward pointing tops of evergreens.

All at once, however, King glanced at the face of the girl where it was smiling up at him from the water—and in a moment he was conscious of a change. Though her face was smiling it was grave too, grave even as his, and he knew that in the look each gave the other there were depths that were more unfathomable than the skies—the depths of life itself in all its mystery and serious meaning.

They got up and walked off down the path towards the cabin, strangely silent, both of them. As they emerged from the cover of the woods and came within sight of the cabin only a few yards ahead of them, Cherry stopped and laid her hand quickly upon King's arm. King glanced at her, and then turned in the direction indicated by her eyes. A man was just leaving the doorway of the cabin where old Keith McBain was still sitting. It was McCartney.

For a moment Cherry stood silently watching him, her hand still upon King's arm. Then she started slowly towards the cabin, her eyes still following the movements of the big foreman as he walked down the path that led from the cabin to the camp.

"You wanted to know why I didn't answer when first you called me to-day," she said, almost in a whisper. "Well—I wasn't sure that it was you—I thought it might be him."

There came into her eyes a look of appeal which changed quickly to the look that King had seen there the night before when she had asked him if he could fight. She seemed on the point of speaking, but with an impatient toss of her head she hurried down the pathway, King following closely behind her.

CHAPTER FOUR

In another hour King was ready to take the trail again. Beside him stood Cherry, her own black horse waiting only a few yards away.

A dark cloud had risen in the north-east, and King glanced quickly about

him at the skies and at the trees rustling noisily in the little breeze that had sprung up.

"It's like rain," he warned her quietly. "Perhaps you'd better not go this time."

The faintest suspicion of a frown passed quickly over her face, but that was all the reply his warning drew from her. Before he could help her she had stepped upon a low-cut stump and had sprung lightly into the saddle.

Keith McBain watched them from his seat near the doorway.

"I'll be looking for you early, my girl," he said.

"I'll be back before it begins to rain," she replied, and turning her horse about started towards the trail.

King got up at once, pausing a moment to bid the old man good-bye before he followed Cherry.

"Look after yourself," the old fellow replied, "and come in next trip. It'll be dull for you now—and we'd be glad to see you."

"I'll come," King replied. "I'd like to come—and I'd like to hear you talk again."

"And send that girl of mine back before she gets too far away," the old fellow called to King who had already started down the pathway.

The clouds that were gathering behind them as they rode westward seemed to hasten the coming of the darkness, although the sun was just setting when they started. Far up the right-of-way, along which the trail ran for a little distance, the western sky was a blaze of glory between the rows of tall trees that stood back from the grade on either side. Once or twice as they rode along King turned in his saddle to look again at the storm clouds gathering in the east. There was little fear of their being overtaken by the storm—it was still a long way off and was coming up very slowly. And yet King wondered that the girl should be so keen upon taking a ride when at any moment the dark bank of heavy thunder clouds might suddenly rush up and force her to ride back through a drenching rain, to say nothing of the thunder and lightning. But such a possibility apparently never entered the mind of Cherry McBain, or if it did she never showed the least concern about it. She urged her horse forward at a steady pace that made King hurry to keep up. Not till they had covered the whole length of the trail lying along the right-of-way and had gone some distance beyond where it turned into the woods and started up the hill did she draw rein. Then she brought her horse slowly to a walk and turned to look behind her. She had not spoken since she left the cabin, and as King drew up with her he ventured to ask if she didn't think she had gone far enough. The look she gave him by way of reply was enough to make him wish he had not spoken.

"Are you really so anxious to have me go back?" she asked.

It was King's turn to look at her in surprise. There was something more than surprise in his voice, however, when he spoke.

"I guess I must have said what wasn't in my mind to say," he replied very quietly. "I don't think you got me quite right there."

Suddenly she brought her horse to a standstill and slipped out of the saddle to the ground.

"Get down and walk for a little while," she said, looking about her as she spoke. "The rain is a long way off yet and I'm not afraid."

King responded by getting down at once. He stood for a moment with the bridle in his hand and waited for her to come up to him. Then they walked slowly side by side along the trail. For a few minutes they proceeded in silence, King waiting for her to begin.

"I was afraid you might want to send me back," she began at last, "and I didn't want to go. I wanted to talk to you. I want to tell you about my father. You saw him to-night, and you know there is something wrong—you couldn't help knowing that as well as I do."

She was not asking a question. She was merely stating a fact in which she confidently expected King's concurrence. The pause was not to give him an opportunity of replying. She wished only to collect her thoughts, to marshal the parts of the story she was about to tell him.

"My father is a railway construction contractor," she went on after she had walked a few yards without speaking. "The men love him—and they hate him—both at the same time. He's generous and he's straight, and he's good—but he's hard in his dealings and he crushes everyone who opposes him. For years he has taken railway contracts and worked in the woods. I was born in a mining camp out west, where my father was prospecting. When I began to grow up I was allowed to spend only a few weeks each summer in camp with him and mother. The rest of the summer I spent with my aunt in Winnipeg, where I went to school. But I never liked it. I always wanted to be with them in the camp. I loved the life and I loved the men and their rough ways. Most of all, I loved my father—my mother was very quiet and very sweet, but my father and I have always been chums."

She paused a moment to pick up a small stick from the road which she sent whirling along the trail ahead of her.

"One day something happened. My mother told me what she knew about it and my father knows that she told me, but he has never spoken to me about it. Two years ago he left my mother and me in the city and went to the coast with some others to look for gold. One of the men was Bill McCartney, who was a teamster for my father during the previous summer. In the spring they came back unexpectedly. Father had written us to tell us that he had made a good

strike, but when he came back there was a change. McCartney was with him, and one night they sat all night long and there were loud words between them. In the morning my father told us that he had lost everything and that McCartney was going back to the coast again. He told mother something that made her cry, but he said, 'A bargain is a bargain—and I count this a good bargain.' Those are the only words I ever heard him speak about the affair. McCartney left that night. After that my mother grew sick—and she never got better. Later I came to camp to be with her, and one night she told me that she was dying—she said her heart was breaking—breaking for my father. She told me that some day McCartney would be back—that she hoped she might die before he came. She died last summer and McCartney came back just a few weeks later."

The muscles in King's arms grew rigid and his hands clenched fiercely as his mind rested upon the fragmentary story that Cherry McBain had told him. Instinctively he felt that Bill McCartney had been in some way the cause of the death of Keith McBain's wife.

"There was something more," she said, suddenly breaking in upon his musing. "When McCartney came back my father made him foreman of the camp and ever since then the control of the work has been gradually passing out of father's hands. To make matters worse, father has been drinking until his very mind is going. Some day, I am afraid, he will drink himself to death. And it is not all on account of the loss of my mother. There is something else. The bargain he made with McCartney did not work out satisfactorily. The claim turned out badly and McCartney came back dissatisfied. And now—though he has never said so openly—he has plans of a different kind. Once he met me alone on the trail—he had followed me without my knowing it—and when he tried to be pleasant to me in his own way, I told him to leave me. He grinned and took me by the arm and then—I struck him with my hand across the face. His expression never changed, but he warned me never to do that again—and he spoke of my father. The next day father came to me—his voice broken—his face haggard; he hadn't slept all night. And he told me not to make McCartney angry. He told me to stay away from him—go back to the city—anything, but to keep out of his way and give him no cause for anger. I told my father that I would not leave him—and I won't. But I can't go anywhere without that man shadowing me. I can't speak to one of the men but he comes and forces his attentions upon me, though he knows that I hate him. One thing—he has never offered to touch me again, and I have never had the heart to tell him what I think. I am always thinking of what may happen—and I can see the fear in my father's eyes."

She came a little closer to King and laid her hand on his arm.

"Some day," she said slowly, and her breast rose and fell fitfully as she spoke, "some day he will not wait any longer. I shall have to make my choice. Either I

shall smile on him and accept his attentions—or I shall send him away and bring upon myself the complete ruin of a life that is already broken beyond hope of repair.”

A faint rumbling of distant thunder caused them both to stop and look behind them.

”It is something new for me to be afraid. I never was afraid before—only there has been a change—a change that I don’t like because I don’t know how to meet it. The men in the camp have always been good to me. My mother was good to them and they liked her—and I have tried to be good to them. I have always thought they liked me too. But there are some—we meet them once in a while—who can’t stand good treatment. They weren’t born for it. And McCartney has got a few of that kind with him.”

They had come to a ridge overlooking a valley, a sort of ravine, through which a small stream picked its straggling course between the hills. Dusk had already set in and the stream was only faintly visible.

Without announcing her intentions, Cherry dropped her bridle-rein and left her horse standing on the trail while she led the way to a knoll that commanded a better view of the ravine. For a long time she stood looking to the westward where only a faint arc of light was still left low upon the horizon. Her hat was in her hand and the quiet breeze that came from the east blew a few loose locks of her dark hair about her face. King gazed at her intently, and thought of McCartney.

He had picked up a stout tamarac stick on his way to the knoll. It was almost as thick as his wrist and was sound and dry. Without speaking a word and without twitching a muscle of his face he slowly bent the stick in his two hands until it began to snap. Then he twisted it until the frayed ends parted and he held the two ragged bits of stick in his hands. These he flung into a clump of bushes on the slope below.

Cherry looked at him quietly.

”No,” she said slowly, ”not that—not that. Some day it may have to come—some day I may call you—but not yet.”

King smiled gravely.

”I told you last night about my brother, Dick,” he said. ”Well—Dick is dead.”

”King!”

She had never before called him by his first name.

”Yes—I had a letter last night. It was waiting for me when I got down. But that’s all gone now—it’s past and settled. But this other thing—it has mixed me some. I didn’t think I’d ever want to hit a man again. And I’m not looking for McCartney—not for any man,” he said, and his eyes turned to the spot where he had thrown the broken stick. ”But no man ever found me running—and Bill

McCartney won't."

Cherry laid one hand on his arm and looked at him.

"He has gone to town with a lot of men to-night," she said. "They often ride in on Saturday night—that's why we have been able to ride and talk together. He will be there when you get to town—and all day to-morrow. And listen—I'm not afraid—not afraid for you, nor for me. But I don't want you to meet him yet."

King's reply came quietly and with great deliberation.

"I've been in that town since the first tent was pitched," he observed in a voice that was even and showed no excitement. "I've watched it grow up—and I've gone pretty much where I liked. I guess I'll go on in about the same way."

"Oh, I'm not afraid of that," Cherry replied. "I've told you I'm not afraid for you—and not for myself. But if the break should come—"

"I guess you don't need to worry about that," King remarked. "There won't be any break between me and McCartney—not till there's a reason for it."

Cherry went back again to the trail and taking the bridle-rein in her hand led the way down towards the river. King followed her until they came to the roughly-made bridge that spanned the little stream, a hurriedly constructed bridge of tamarac poles that had been thrown into place by the advance parties of railway workers.

"I have never gone farther than this," said Cherry, when they had come to the centre of the bridge. "I often ride out in the evenings and stand here for a while before going back. Some day I am going on to town, just to see what sort of place you have."

"This is the White Pine," said King. "I have crossed it often higher up. It gets very nasty after two or three days' rain."

Suddenly a flash of lightning reminded them that the storm was approaching. While they talked they had all but forgotten the black clouds rolling up from the east. Cherry got up at once upon the stout log that ran along the side of the bridge to keep the poles in place, and putting one foot into the stirrup drew herself up lightly into the saddle. When she was seated she turned and looked at King.

"We shall ride out again some time," she said, and gave him her hand.

He closed his big hand over her fingers for a moment without speaking. When he was about to turn away she clung still to his hand and looked at him very earnestly.

"Why don't you sometimes talk a little?" she asked.

The abruptness with which she asked the question brought the slow smile back to King's face.

"I'm not good at talking," he replied. "Besides—I like to hear you talk."

King had not ventured before in their short acquaintance to offer a com-

pliment. He did not mean to compliment her now. He was speaking his mind simply, directly, sincerely.

She regarded him strangely for a moment in silence.

"Sometimes," she said at last, "sometimes I think—"

She paused a moment and then withdrew her hand suddenly and wheeling her horse about went off at a gallop down the trail, leaving him gazing after her in wonderment.

When she had passed out of sight he looked once at the clouds before getting into the saddle and then, getting up, he gave a sharp whistle that brought Sal bounding to him, and set off along the trail that led to town. Behind him the storm was coming up rapidly.

"It's you for it now," he said to his horse as he leaned forward and stroked the warm neck.

Only once after that did his voice break the silence of the long ride. The first drops of rain brought him suddenly out of his dreaming.

"If you could only talk!" he said to himself, and his voice was full of impatience.

But King Howden was no talker.

CHAPTER FIVE

The town was in a state of excitement that was not altogether new. In fact, the few score of permanent residents in the place always looked to Saturday night to furnish some little change from the humdrum existence of the week. There is nothing very stirring about sitting in a village—even if it is an outpost of civilization a hundred and twenty-five miles from anywhere—with nothing to do from day to day except to greet the newcomers who arrive from the outside to begin their search for land. But when a couple of red-coated men wearing blue breeches striped on either side with gold, their heads covered with wide-brimmed Stetsons, their feet stoutly booted and spurred—when two such men ride in from over the Saskatchewan border and go clanking down the one street in the place a certain amount of shuffling is almost inevitable.

Nor was the flutter of excitement due to any fear that the "Mounties" were on business bent. Since the jurisdiction of the famous riders of the plains did not extend any farther than the border, their sudden appearance set no one guess-

ing as to who, among the men of the town, was being entertained, a criminal unawares. The place had served as a week-end retreat for the men of the force before, and all such occasions had turned out more or less eventful.

No previous arrangement had been made that would have explained the sudden influx of men who came into town from all over the district to spend the week-end together. But small groups had begun to arrive before the sun had set—some of the settlers had come in during the day from their shacks on lonely homesteads and made a fair-sized reception committee to greet the later arrivals. There were men there from Rubble's survey gang, and a dozen or more from the camp of Keith McBain.

That they should make their rendezvous late in the evening at Mike Cheney's was only natural. There was MacMurray's lodging house, of course, that stood at the end of the street near the river, but no one came to town to eat. Cheney's place stood at the other end of the street—discreetly apart. And those who came and went exercised considerable discretion and talked very little when others were in hearing.

Mike Cheney himself treated his business very philosophically. In a man's country where men were in the habit of taking life none too seriously, there must needs be some place to foregather—so he thought—on the days when the rain drove everyone indoors, and on nights when the rest of the town had gone to bed. Furthermore, there was need of a place of last call for the men on their way to the railway camps or the homesteads. Besides, what were men to do in the winter, with the thermometer dancing back and forth between thirty and forty degrees below zero, if they had to depend solely upon bad tea and weak coffee? Mike declared, and to all intents and purposes he believed, that he served the community in proportion as he was successful in dispensing conviviality among its members. It didn't occur to him to feel abashed that a few held him and his business in abhorrence. Nor did it worry him that he was conducting his business without legal sanction. It would have caused him as much trouble to win the regard of such as held him in contempt as to procure an official document setting the seal of the government's approval on his business. He was content to give little or no heed to either.

And so, without any special announcement, and without any invitation, the visitors took their way, when it was late enough, to the large room at the back of Mike Cheney's place, where they knew they would be made heartily welcome. And to tell the truth, a welcome of some kind was something the men felt the need of. Rain had begun to fall quite heavily—what had looked like a mere thunder shower when it appeared first in the north-east, had steadied down to an all-night rain. And certainly MacMurray's lodging house offered no cheer. No one, furthermore, even cast his eyes a second time in the direction of the two

large log buildings the government had erected for immigrants without shelter.

The room at the back of Cheney's place was blue with smoke that rendered almost useless the large kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling. In one corner of the room a small group were already well into a game of poker. Though the stakes were of necessity low—for what can men do on a dollar a day?—the interest in the game was sufficiently high to attract a half dozen spectators who watched the play in silence and smoked incessantly.

In another corner three or four land-seekers were exchanging opinions of the fine points of the law governing the rights of the "squatter," and the rather intricate regulations that made provision for what is known as "jumping" a claim.

In the corner farthest from the door where Mike Cheney stood at the service of his customers, Big Bill McCartney was listening to what one of the red-coated visitors had to say about the effect of solitude on a man's nerves. The subject was one that evidently appealed strongly to one of MacDougall's men, whose mood was rather too jovial for so early in the evening and whose literary instincts prompted him to attempt the metrical flights of the lines beginning,

"I am monarch of all I survey."

McCartney pushed him back on the bench where he had been sitting and turned to hear something that Cheney was offering to the discussion.

"There's another thing about this country," said Mike, leaning towards McCartney and the red-coat. "It's a-gettin' to some of the boys in a way they never expected."

He paused a moment to wipe up a little water from the table with his cloth.

"Now there was old Bob Nason—he was before your time here, Bill. He was one of the first to come in here when the trail was opened into the valley. There was a good fellow for you—an' a good man too. No better ever put foot on the ground. Saw him heave a barrel of salt into the back end of his wagon—just like that."

Mike used appropriate gestures to show how easily the thing had been done.

"I'd like to have seen you an' him together, Bill," he went on, and a broad smile accompanied his remarks. "Could 'a' give you about all you could handle, Bill, if size counts for anything. Anyhow—poor old Bob came in here one night—it was a night like this—only there was a regular howlin' wind and the rain was heavy. I hears a poundin' at the door—I was all alone—an' I gets up and opens it. An' there stands Old Bob—feet bare—shirt gone—head bare—pants all in rags—an' mud an' water—it was awful!"

He paused in an effort, evidently, to call the picture more vividly to mind.

"An' I says, 'Bob, what's wrong?' An' then I knew right away what it was—from the grin he gave me. But I says, 'Come in an' get something'. An' poor old Bob comes in an' sits down an' starts cryin' like a baby. An' I says, 'Bob, you're lookin' bad,' but he wouldn't talk. I sat with him all night an' the next day we sent him out with a couple of boys that was totin' freight."

For a moment Mike paused while he turned to pick up an empty glass and look at it.

"My God," he said, looking into the glass, "to think of old Bob losin' his head out there—just for the sake of someone to talk to. I'll never forget it."

"It'll get to anyone if he's only left alone long enough," commented the policeman, and he went on to tell of a similar case that had come under his observation in the West.

"There's just one thing this country needs right now, Mike—an' it needs it bad," McCartney offered by way of supplementing what had just been said. As he spoke he held a lighted match in his hand ready to apply to a cigarette he had just rolled.

"You mean—" Cheney waited.

For a moment McCartney was silent while he applied the match to his cigarette.

"I mean—"

The door opened suddenly and a girl stepped into the room.

"—there's the answer," he concluded.

Several of the men glanced up as the door closed and the girl came forward to where Cheney was standing on the corner. He greeted her quite casually.

"Hello, Anne," he said, "you sure picked a good night for strollin'. What's the idea?"

For a moment she said nothing by way of reply as she shook the rain from the cloak that hung loosely about her shoulders. Then she looked round the room at the men.

"Nothin's the idea," she remarked. "It's my night off and—well, where can you go in this place. Slingin' grub's all right—ten hours a day—but you want a change, don't you? Give me a smoke."

The request was addressed to McCartney, who proceeded at once to roll a cigarette while she looked on.

"Nobody in this town let's me in if they know I'm comin'," she remarked in a tone that carried not the slightest trace of regret. She wished simply to record the fact merely.

And a fact it was, for Anne, who was the single waitress at the lodging-house, had been placed in a class by herself in the town, though not a man in it—or woman either—had any facts upon which to base their prejudice.

For a moment only during the process of rolling the cigarette the eyes of McCartney and the girl met. No one in the room saw the exchange of glances and no one could have detected the slightest change of expression in either face.

McCartney smiled oddly as he folded the edge of the cigarette paper into place and tapped the ends lightly against his hand.

"Shouldn't have any trouble findin' a little entertainment in this bunch," he observed.

She regarded him coldly. "You didn't hear me sayin' anything about entertainment, did you?" she returned.

Without making any immediate reply he gave her the cigarette and offered his own for a light.

"Tell you what, Anne," he said at last, "I've a hunch you've brought me luck to-night an' I'd like to sit in to a game. I'd like to know if the boys here play the kind of a game I'm used to. Come on over, Anne, an' look on."

They walked over to the corner where the men were playing cards. On the far side of the table was Lush Currie, the pile of chips before him indicating that he had held a few good hands during the evening. As McCartney took his place at the table, Currie hesitated for a moment and acted as if he wanted to withdraw from the game. McCartney received his pile of chips and arranged them in three little piles under his right hand, then scanned the faces of the men before him.

For men who take life as it comes, one day at a time and little thought of the morrow, poker is the game of games. It matters little whether it is played in the Far North where men take fortunes from the beds of frozen creeks, or on the quieter and less rugged frontiers where they build the nation's highways at a dollar a day and three square meals always in sight. In one case the stakes are for thousands, with a jack-pot sometimes growing into six figures. In the other the limits are set by the meagre earnings of a season of some six months or so between the spring and the freeze-up. One man risks a fortune he may retrieve in a single month of good luck with his shovel and pan. The other lays a wager that will take him a whole season to pay if he comes off loser. But in any case, whatever the circumstances, the game is the same, and the men are the same—playing the game for the game's sake and despising nothing so much as a poor loser—unless it be a crooked winner.

For the first half hour or so the game that McCartney had just taken a hand in went along very quietly—like the first rounds of a match with the boxers sparring for an opening. The cards having been cut, the deal fell to the man on McCartney's left. The round found them all without openers and the pack was dealt again. This time Lush Currie opened the game and the others stayed.

"Cards?" said the dealer, who was Dan Martin, of Rubble's gang.

He came to Currie and looked at him questioningly.

"This is good enough for me," replied Currie and left his cards where he had put them face downwards on the table before him.

When Martin came to McCartney the latter drew three cards, glanced at them and laying them down smiled across the table at Anne. Currie made a small bet which was raised by the next man. Then they waited for McCartney. He picked up his cards, glanced at them again—and tossed them to one side. Dan Martin seemed about to raise the bet, but on second thought decided to let it stand. The next man followed McCartney's example and with three men in the game Currie called and won with three queens.

"Pretty easy pickin', Currie," he said.

"Why didn't you stay, then?" asked Martin. "I didn't tell you to get out."

"I might 'a' stayed at that," McCartney replied.

The next two games were won on a pair of aces and two pairs, respectively. The cards then went to the man on McCartney's left and he dealt. McCartney picked up his cards one by one as they came to him and arranged them in his hand.

"Comin' like trained pigs!" he said. "What'd I tell you, Anne? You're my luck—just see this thing through an' I'll split the loot."

There was nothing contagious in his pleasantries. Though he appeared in high spirits, his hilarity was so obviously artificial that no one paid any particular attention to him—except, perhaps, Lush Currie, who glanced back at Anne with his cards still in his hand. Then, as if a thought suddenly struck him, he closed his hands quickly over his cards and laid them down.

The girl, on her part, did not even so much as look up—either at McCartney or at Currie. She appeared too busy with her own thoughts and was unaware of the suspicions that were being entertained regarding her.

When the round was completed McCartney drew the chips towards him and reached for the deck—he had won on a show-down with three fives and a pair of jacks. It was his deal.

"Now then, you're comin' to me, see?" he cried as he slipped the cards one by one from the pack and slid them to the players. "That makes first blood—an' the night's young!"

For a few moments there was silence while the players looked at their cards. This time Currie opened high and the others stayed. They took their draws and settled down. No one bet until it came round to McCartney.

"I'll just kick 'er along a little bit," he said, and put in his chips.

Two players threw their cards away, leaving Currie, McCartney and two others in the game. It was Currie's turn to bet. He picked up one card that had been dealt to him in the draw and was about to look at it. As he did so he hesitated and looked across the table. McCartney's eyes were on Anne. Something in the

latter's face made Currie postpone his bet for a moment.

"Anne," he said, glancing over his shoulder, "you're sittin' too close to me. It ain't lucky—an' I don't like it."

His voice betrayed excitement and the girl was not slow to catch the implication.

"Say, Lush Currie—look here," she protested, "what are you tryin' to tell me?"

"Nothin' only what I said," Currie replied. "Don't sit behind me in this game."

His voice was shaking as he spoke and he fingered his cards nervously.

"Sit round here, Anne," said McCartney, his voice full of sarcasm. "He's jealous—he doesn't like you lookin' at me so often."

McCartney's efforts to make a joke of the whole affair were pathetically inadequate, and served only to heighten Currie's suspicion. But the girl stood up and faced McCartney with a look that was as cold as it was direct.

"Say, Bill McCartney," she remarked in a voice that was cutting in its deliberateness, "does Lush Currie think I'm tippin' you off to his hand? Well, listen to me. I've been lookin' a whole long time for the kind of man I'd do that for an'—you—ain't—him."

McCartney's expression changed suddenly.

"What the hell are you anyhow?" he asked, with a sneer, and turned to Currie. "Your bet, Currie."

For answer Currie threw his cards into the centre of the table and got up from his chair.

"This game can go on without me," he said, and he moved his chair back and walked away from the group.

A couple of the players put out restraining hands and tried to persuade him to go on with the game. Cheney came forward and invited him to take a drink, but Currie was obstinate.

"I don't sit in to no game with a—"

The epithet he used brought McCartney to his feet. He pushed his chair to one side with his foot and stepped towards Currie.

"You ain't big enough to say that to me," he said, tossing his cigarette to one side.

The men showed no desire to interfere. The history of Currie's previous encounter had gone the rounds and left them all hoping that Currie might some day have an opportunity to meet his man fairly and have it out. They had little respect for Currie, whose untimely accusations against Anne were, they felt sure, not only out of place but without foundation. The girl's rebuff had rung true and no one doubted her—though they were convinced that Bill McCartney would

have used any advantage, had it been offered to him.

They stood back to give room to the two men who occupied a space near the centre of the floor. They liked a fight and they wanted to see the much-talked-of foreman in action.

McCartney bore down steadily on Currie, who relied upon his quick, cat-like movements as his sole means of defending himself against the towering strength of his opponent. But wherever Currie went McCartney followed relentlessly, taking the short quick jabs of his antagonist without showing the slightest uneasiness. He displayed the full confidence of one who knows that if he can get his man into a corner he can end the fight in a few seconds. But that was precisely what Currie avoided. He danced about McCartney and landed light blows almost at will. Finally the big fellow began to show signs of ugly temper and quickened his advance in an effort to get within fair striking distance. As he came close Currie crouched near the door and then leaped and sent his foot out in a vicious kick that barely missed McCartney's chin. As it was, the foreman took the full force of the blow on his neck and for a few seconds staggered backwards, shaking his head savagely and blinking his eyes as if to clear his sight. Had Currie followed up his advantage at once the affair might have been ended right there. But while he hesitated McCartney recovered sufficiently to size up the situation afresh.

He stood for a few moments looking at Currie, his face twisted into a smile. Those who saw that smile began to feel pity for the smaller man who had put up a good fight and a plucky one. There was a look in Currie's face too, that seemed to reveal for the first time his failing confidence in the outcome.

"It's going to be stiff travellin' for Lush from now on," murmured one of the men to Cheney in a voice that was barely audible.

McCartney, who was near enough to the speaker to overhear the remark, seemed about to speak, but he shut his teeth hard and went towards Currie crouching in an attitude of cautious defence. His face was the face of an animal.

Suddenly Cheney pushed his way forward, a look of consternation on his face as he watched Currie vainly shifting his position in a last effort to get out of the way and gain the open space in the middle of the floor.

"Ain't someone goin' to stop this before it's gone too far?" he muttered to one of the men.

No one made reply.

There was a quick, sharp cry as Anne came out of the semi-darkness of one corner and rushed forward in a frantic effort to get between the two men.

"Stop—for God's sake! Oh, you damned fools!" she cried, struggling vainly to break the grip of a couple of men who held her back. Then she was pushed

gently into her place in the corner, where she sat down on the bench and covered her face with her hands.

Currie was now in a narrow space between the door and the table at which only a few minutes before they had been playing poker. Twice he made a quick move to get out, and twice McCartney caught him before he was well started and drove him back. In another moment it would all be over.

Then something happened which no one among the onlookers seemed altogether for the moment to understand. Currie crouched low as if preparing for another spring—but everyone knew it would be a hopeless attempt. Suddenly he straightened up—his hand came quickly from behind him and shot towards McCartney—but not for a blow.

"No—no, sir," said Currie, his breath coming short and labored, "no—you can't—you can't get me—like that. Get back—I'll get you—sure as God—I'll bore you. Now—get back."

McCartney sprang back and looked at Currie who had covered him. He knew—they all knew—that Lush Currie was fool enough to shoot if it came to a show-down. And no man can trust a gun in the hands of a fool. The big foreman turned in mute appeal to one of the mounted policemen who stood near.

Suddenly the door opened and King Howden stepped into the room, took off his hat, shook the rain from it, and then looked around him. His mind, usually slow at taking in a situation, seemed to react quickly to what he saw on this occasion. He took a step farther down the room and rubbed his eyes quickly with one hand as if the light bothered him. Then he looked again at the men and turned to Currie, who was crouching near him. Something like a smile played upon his face as he stepped to Currie and extended his hand.

"You ain't clear on some things, I guess," he said, in a voice that was unusually stern and direct. "This ain't a gunning country."

Without another word he stepped deliberately to where Currie stood, and taking the gun from him, opened it and having emptied it into his hand, returned it. Turning round, his eyes fell upon Anne, who had got up again and was coming forward.

"Anne," he said, "you better be getting along home."

There was a note in his voice that the girl had never heard before. This man was not the King Howden she had talked to often during the summer. She drew her cloak about her shoulders and went out.

Then King looked at Bill McCartney. He was standing back against the table behind which Mike Cheney had stood earlier in the evening when there had been customers to serve. King had been cool and deliberate—now he felt the old demon rising in him and he struggled to gain control of himself. He realized now that he hated this man, though he could scarcely have told why. With a

supreme effort he mastered his rising temper and stood regarding McCartney in silence. The latter, however, realizing that Currie was now at his mercy, and mastered by an uncontrollable desire to end the affair to his advantage, stepped deliberately in the direction of Currie who was cowering near the door.

"Stand back!" he roared, and the words were meant more for King than for the two or three men who made weak attempts to restrain him.

King, recognizing that McCartney was speaking to him, stepped deliberately between the two men.

"You'd better leave," he said, glancing behind him, and even as he spoke Currie opened the door and slipped out.

King was about to follow but turned as McCartney's voice came to him, muttering something he only half heard.

"You're not talking to me, are you?" he said.

McCartney bellowed his reply: "I'm talkin' to you, you son of a dog!"

King moved slowly towards McCartney. He faced the big foreman for a moment, his arms rigid at his sides. Suddenly McCartney's hand shot out and King stepped back just in time to avoid the full force of a blow that, as it was, glanced from his cheek. Slowly King's two hands came up and closed in a convulsive grip. While the men waited breathlessly he stood trembling from the struggle that was going on within him—then he wheeled quickly and going to the door, opened it, and went out.

In the darkness, King, without any thought of picking his way through the mud and water, hurried round the corner of Cheney's place and started down the roadway to where his horse stood tethered in front of old man Hurley's office. Only once did he pause. Just as he stepped into the street a great burst of loud laughter came to him from behind the door he had just closed. He knew what it meant and for a moment his grip upon himself weakened. He wanted to go back—he wanted to fight. For a moment he hesitated. Then his mind was clear again and he went on. All the way down the street, however, he could not help wondering how long he would have to wait.

Then he got up into the saddle and went off along the muddy trail that led west about half a mile to where his little shack stood upon a low ridge that ran in upon his land.

CHAPTER SIX

When King Howden awoke next morning it was with a feeling that he was beginning life in a new world. The feeling was deepened when he looked out through the small window and saw the pools of water left by the night's rain glistening in the bright sunlight. He had not slept well—during the earlier part of the night he had not slept at all. There had been much to think about, much that was perplexing and disquieting. And yet, as he looked from his window at the new morning and saw half a mile away the huts and white tents of The Town flooded with sunlight, he was conscious not so much of the disappointments that the week had brought him, as he was of the new determination, the high resolve with which he looked into the future.

When his mind went back to his brother—as it did frequently—the memory struck pain to his heart, but he was not melancholy. The loneliness he felt caused him to straighten his shoulders and prepare himself to square away before the task that lay before him. What that task was he could only vaguely define as yet. But he was beginning to understand that there was a man's work here—and a big man's work it was—awaiting the coming of someone to do it. The fact had dawned upon him slowly, but the first glimmerings of light were visible just the same. He was coming to see that a new country, even a small, half-enclosed valley-district such as this one, would become what the vital energies of its men made it. He had not as yet had any clear vision of what the country would be in years to come, when little towns and villages would spring up here and there along the railway, when hundreds of men and women and their families would rush in, hopeful that they might build again—and strongly build—though their old lives in other lands had crumbled into ruins. He had no concrete, complete conception of what lay ahead. He had nothing but the vague hopes, the uncertain dreams, the fleeting fancies that had come to him often during the past summer—only now they were more vivid.

To the events of the night before he gave little or no thought—at least, to the events that had brought him into conflict with Bill McCartney. In fact, in his new mood he wondered how he could have come so near to losing his temper over an affair that didn't amount to anything after all. He had been in Cheney's before, but not often. As he thought it over he quietly determined that the less he had to do with Cheney the better. His determination was stiffened as he remembered the group of men he had seen there the night before. It startled him to think how near they had come to witnessing what might easily have been a tragedy, because one of them was bent upon settling a dispute in his own ill-chosen way; and out of all his thinking about these things there grew up within him the clear understanding that only upon order and good judgment could men hope to build for the future in a new community.

In all his wondering about these things—and much of it was very vague

wondering—there was only one element of a personal kind. He confessed to himself now for the first time that Cherry McBain was as nearly indispensable to him as anyone in his life had ever been. And now with the birth of a new hope he did what any man would have done under the circumstances—he threw his whole soul into a resolve that in the game of life he was playing now, the prize was the heart of Cherry McBain. Perhaps it was this thought that helped to make the world a good place for him to live in, and the future something to set store by.

It was something of this nature at any rate that he confided to his sole companion in the shack, old mongrel Sal, who had stood for some time looking up into his face, her shaggy body performing all kinds of contortions in vain attempts to attract her master's attention. Suddenly he sat down on the side of his bed and grasping her two ears with his hands drew her head between his knees and looked into her eyes.

"Sal, you old cuss, you," he said, shaking her head, "there's something I'm going to tell you."

He put his face down until his cheek was resting against the side of her head and murmured something very quietly. Then he straightened up and with his two hands closed the dog's mouth, holding it shut a moment with one hand round her muzzle.

Something in the mood that had come upon King caused him to look critically round the single room that made up the interior of his shack. One golden shaft of sunlight fell from the small window to the floor, but the light it gave revealed a condition that, for some reason or other, he had never been more than vaguely conscious of before. The place was indescribably dirty. His few days' absence from the place had given it a heavy, musty smell that was anything but pleasant. A litter of odd bits of clothing and old papers lay where he had thrown them probably weeks before. The heavy grey blankets on the bunk which he had built into one corner of the shack had not been washed for months—they had not even been spread out to the sun. The table that stood near the window was covered with unwashed tin plates and cups, dirty knives, forks and spoons. A bit of bread, dried hard, and some butter that had turned to grease in the sun's rays lay where he had left them when he went out on his last trip. Grey ashes covered the floor beside the rusted sheet-iron stove.

King had once regarded this as belonging essentially to the only place he knew as home. It had been perfectly natural, and far from revolting. It had been even cosy. But in his present mood he found it disquieting. He could not help wondering to himself how Cherry McBain's senses would react, if she were suddenly ushered into the place.

He sprang up and threw open the door. The fresh Sunday morning air

swept in with its fragrance borne from the balm-o'-gileads that stood near his door shaking their shining leaves in the bright sunlight. As he drew himself up and lifted his chest his huge frame almost filled the doorway. With a word to Sal he went out and made his way leisurely towards the roughly-made stable that stood among the willows skirting the ridge. The desire to put his shack into a presentable condition was superseded by a yearning to roam lazily about the place for a while and indulge his fancies for the future. It was a day to be free and forgetful of duties, and after the crowded week he felt the need of a rest. The general clean-up which he promised himself he would give to his shack could wait—as it had waited during long months before he became conscious of any such need. In the meantime he would feed his horse and then stroll down to the town for some provisions.

When he returned to the shack he made himself a breakfast of oatmeal and fried bacon. The meal was frugal but sufficient to supply his needs for the time being, and he decided to postpone his jaunt to town until late in the day. He wanted to take a walk over his land and think over his plans for the coming year.

King had a real affection for the place he had chosen. He had filed his claim long before there was any competition in the field and had secured what he considered a choice location within easy distance of wood and water. The soil was very rich, and the ridge with its clumps of poplars offered an excellent spot for building. From in front of his shack he could see not only The Town, but beyond it to the blue hills rising to the east and extending southward in a half circle forming one rim of the valley. Between these two ranges lay a wide plain spread out under the blue sky, fertile, well watered and pleasantly wooded. It was not the kind of country King had been accustomed to hearing called "a man's land" in the rugged interior of British Columbia, where he had spent eight of the ten years since he had come west. It was quieter—milder—softer, maybe—and of coloring less vivid. And yet it was a man's country, too, a country with a challenge for anyone who cared to hear it.

It was well on in the afternoon when King got back from his tramp over his land. For a few minutes he sat down upon the door-step and rested before starting for The Town to get something to eat. Sal lay down near him, panting lazily in the shade of the poplars. When he was about to go the dog gave a sharp little bark and stood up quickly with her ears pointed in the direction of the ridge-trail leading to town.

King got up and looked down the trail.

Soon there emerged from behind the clump of willows the figure of a man coming towards him. King sat down again and waited. In a few moments he recognized the figure as that of Lush Currie. As the latter approached him King regarded him with a questioning air. There was something in Currie's face that he

could not quite understand. He offered to bring out a bench for a seat, but Lush protested quite sincerely and sat down on the grass under the poplars. When Currie had rolled himself a fresh cigarette and lighted it he lifted his eyes to King and looked at him squarely for the first time.

"I'm gettin' out," he said abruptly.

King did not reply at first, but Currie's silence prompted him to ask what he meant.

"Just that," said Currie. "I'm goin' outside to-morrow—an' I'll not be back."

It was no unusual thing for a member of a railway construction gang to pack up his belongings and leave for the outside. King was at a loss to know the exact significance of Currie's announcement.

"Before I went I wanted to see you," he continued, "an' to tell you I'm right sorry about last night."

There was something so direct and sincere in the way Currie expressed himself that King felt his heart warming towards the man in spite of his recollections from the night before.

"An' that's the reason I'm gettin' out," he said a little stiffly. "Howden, you came in on a bad mess last night—just about as bad as it could 'a' been. If it hadn't 'a' been for you I'd 'a' been lookin' for a place to hide to-day—waitin' for night to come on so I could walk around without bein' scared."

King moved a little impatiently. He didn't wish to have his interference on Currie's behalf made so much of.

"For three years I've been with Old Silent's outfit," Currie went on. "You know what it means for a man to hitch up with his gang. You stay—that's all there is to it. I never did go lookin' for trouble. An' I never went gunnin' before. I got that thing when I left home back east—I thought I'd mebbe need it. I never had trouble with Old Silent—nor with any of his men. There was a few fights—mostly with boys from other camps—but they were all on the square. This man McCartney was the first man who ever tried anything like that. He's a four-flusher—I know that—an' I could a' trimmed him, too—only now—I can't. There won't be another chance for me."

He paused for a moment while he drew meditatively at his cigarette.

"I lost my head—an' I drew on him. There wasn't room there to fight—an' it was his size that counted. Now I'm not going back. I couldn't stay round camp with him on the job. An', besides—I ain't got the nerve any more—I'd be thinkin' all the time of last night."

When he ceased talking King asked him why he couldn't stay in the valley and go on the land.

"No, Howden," he replied, "that's not my line. I'm goin' west. There's more railroadin' out there an' the world's big enough for two of us. I'll go west an' look

round a bit. But there's one thing I want you to remember, Howden." He got up as he spoke and King closed the door and prepared to start down the trail. "Bill McCartney's fight is over with me—him an' me don't come together again here—but you an' him will, an' don't forget it. He's a dirty dog—he'll bite when you're not lookin'—but he's not afraid to bite just the same. What's more—he'll go on bitin' unless he gets whipped. Then he'll stop—he'll get out then just like me."

The two men went off together down the trail, and as King walked along in silence he felt the optimism and the buoyancy that had filled him during the earlier part of the day struggling against the melancholy that had haunted him strangely for months. It was not his nature to change his mood quickly, but the warning that Currie had sounded brought upon him the full consciousness that he had an enemy who would never be quiet until he himself had brought him to subjection by nothing but brute strength. He was not afraid, but he had hoped that in the days to come he would only have to take up the struggle that men wage against nature in their efforts to make a living. The thought of having to fight it out with Bill McCartney before he could have any peace weighed upon him in a way that made him feel impatient with himself. He made up his mind, however, that he would never fight until the occasion arose that demanded it—then he would see it through to the bitter end. The thought steadied him as he walked along the trail, and his voice became more cheerful as he chatted with Currie.

* * * * *

In the lodging house old man Rubble was discussing the affair of the night before with a half dozen of the men of his own party. Word had gone round that Lush Currie had decided to leave, and it was generally agreed that he was doing the only thing reasonable under the circumstances. The real point of interest was the relationship between King Howden and Bill McCartney. As the latter, with a number of Keith McBain's men had just left for camp, there was no reason for postponing a discussion that had been held up during the day, merely because the presence of Bill McCartney made any reference to the question a little difficult. Now that McCartney had gone, the question was raised at once and the discussion had become very spirited. One thing puzzled them all. Why had King Howden not taken the challenge when it was given to him and finished the fight right there? The challenge had certainly been offensive enough to have justified any man's accepting it at once. And King would never again get an opportunity to fight McCartney when the latter was just finishing one struggle. The advantage had lain all with King, and to tell the truth, the men were not a little disappointed that he had failed to go in when the conditions were so much in his favor. It was

something more to increase the wondering they had already felt concerning King Howden.

"There's only one way to reason it out," said old man Rubble, after various opinions had been expressed. "The fact is Howden don't want to mix in with Bill at all. No one ever saw Howden do anything yet. He's just a big, raw, overgrown boy. He never did fight and I guess he never will if he can get out of it."

Someone in the group murmured a word of protest.

"Well," said Rubble, "I'm willing to wait till I find out. But I'm telling you right now that no man in any gang I've ever been with would have let Bill McCartney get away with it. If King Howden's got any stomach—and if he's got anything in it—he'd 'a' hit Bill McCartney on the jaw before he could have got the words out. I may be wrong, but—Howden's no good!"

But Rubble was not allowed to dismiss the affair so summarily. There was a somewhat thin voice that finally broke the long silence that followed Rubble's words. Old Gabe Smith, who had been a silent spectator during the events of the night before and had given silent audience to all the discussion of the day, ventured a remark or two that he was inclined to think had a bearing on the subject.

"An' what I would say is this," he observed in his most philosophical manner, after he had given due notice that he intended to speak on the question, "an' I have a feelin' that I'm not far wrong—what I would say is—if anybody here is takin' Mister Rubble's view of the matter—an' he's a right to his own opinion—he'd better not make up his mind for a little while—not just yet. An' I'll tell you why. In the first place we know that when Bill McCartney first met Currie it wasn't quite what you'd want to call reglar. He got Lush—but he got him foul. An' that ain't the way a good man gets anybody. An' then—in the second place—that affair last night was a little off color—Lush couldn't do anything there—he hadn't room. But—" and Gabe pointed the stem of his pipe at Rubble to emphasize his words, "we haven't seen this boy Howden at work yet."

"That's just it, Gabe," Rubble interrupted, "and we never will."

"Just a minute, now," Gabe persisted. "We haven't seen him workin' yet—but we may—we may. An' I'm goin' to wait long enough to give the boy a chance before I say my last word."

"Lord, Gabe, didn't he have a chance last night?"

"Well, Mister Rubble," Gabe replied with great deliberateness, "there might be a difference of opinion on that point. You would say he had—I would say that we don't know exactly. If we give him a few weeks longer, Mister Rubble, we'll both know pretty well which one of us is right. But in my opinion this boy Howden is no coward—he may have acted a bit strange—but he's not a coward—not to my way of thinkin'—just yet."

Gabe was sitting with his back to the doorway as he spoke and did not see the figure that was standing there while he was engrossed in making his opinion quite plain to Rubble. The other men, however, forgot to listen to Gabe's exposition and were staring uneasily at King Howden, who had appeared while the old man was talking and had stopped suddenly on hearing his own name. When Gabe had finished, he turned confusedly to discover the cause of the change that was so evident in the faces of the men, and met the gaze that fell upon him from eyes that were cold and unwavering. Then he saw the face grow serious and the lines of his lips tighten. The next moment he seemed conscious most of the stillness that had fallen upon the group of men who filled the room. His attempt to relieve his own embarrassment as well as that of the men was a little awkward, but he felt it was better than nothing.

"No harm meant, Howden, my boy," he said, and his voice was steady and quiet, "but we were talkin' about you."

"I guess it's all right, Gabe," said King, and he took a step into the room.

"You heard what I said?" the old man asked.

"That ain't troubling me any," King replied, "—not any at all."

But even as he spoke, his face revealed the struggle that was going on within him. He was not concerned over the words that he had heard from Gabe Smith. He knew, however, that someone had spoken words that had prompted Gabe to make a reply; and it rankled in his heart that he should come to be looked upon as a coward by anyone.

He went to a chair standing back against the wall and sat down. The conversation dragged along without interest, old man Rubble doing his best to carry it into one field after another without success until he finally gave up in despair and went out. Before long the others followed him, all except Gabe Smith, who remained alone with King.

"I'm an older man than you," he began when they were left alone, "—older by nearly thirty years. An' I've had some chances to look around in the past thirty years. An' I'm goin' to tell you right here some things you've got to know. I've watched you—an' I like you. An' when a man likes another he wants him to get along."

King's smile expressed the gratitude he felt. "I watched that business last night in Cheney's—an' I want to tell you what I think. It wasn't your fight to begin with—Lush and McCartney had been layin' for each other for quite a little while. They had to settle it one way or the other. It ain't settled yet—an' what's worse you've got yourself in for a part of that settlement, too."

King leaned forward a little and looked at Gabe. "It's been settled—between them two," he said gravely.

"How settled?"

"Lush won't be goin' back to work any more. He's goin' out to-morrow."

"He's leavin', then—for sure?"

"Yes. He walked up to see me this afternoon an'—he says he can't stay here."

Gabe puckered his lips and was silent a moment. "Then—that means," he said very thoughtfully, "—that means he's handed it over to you."

King made no reply.

"You've got to take it up from last night," Gabe remarked again, and again King remained silent. Gabe was silent, too, for a long time, and when he spoke his words were so sudden and direct that King was startled. "Why didn't you finish it last night?"

King turned round slightly to meet Anne, who came into the room and greeted him. He waited until she left before he spoke.

"Gabe," he said at last, "it's been clear between us up to now, hasn't it?"

Gabe nodded his head slowly without a word.

"I want it to be clear—right on—from now till the end. I wanted to settle it—an' I guess I could, too." His voice was quiet, but no man could have doubted King's confidence in himself. "But there was a man once who said just what Bill McCartney called me last night—an' I killed him."

It was Gabe's turn to be startled. He took his pipe from his mouth quickly and looked at King with consternation on his face.

"You—you killed him, boy?"

"It seems like I did," King replied slowly. "I never can tell exactly. Something came up in me—something blinded me—an' I struck. When they lifted him up I knew I killed him—I was sure—because I meant to—that's what I tried to do. They told me afterwards—they told me he came round again—he was alive. But I couldn't believe it—he was my brother." King looked out the open doorway for a moment. "I've wondered about that a lot," he said after a long silence. "I think I've prayed about it, too—but I can't get it just right. That's why I left—that's why I came here. I wanted to get away from it—and start in new. I wanted to—to make that right with myself."

Gabe Smith seemed puzzled to understand clearly what King was saying to him.

"Last night," continued King, "it came back again. I thought I was strong enough, but I guess I ain't. When he called me that—it all came back. I went blind again—and I wanted to kill Bill McCartney—only then I remembered, and it took the heart out of me."

"Listen, boy," said Gabe. "Some day you are goin' to forget that—all of it. Some day you are goin' out to fight—an' to fight clean—and to win, and I'll tell you why. There's some of us countin' on you, and you've got to make good—"

that's why."

King got up and going over to the old man gripped his shoulder in his large powerful hand and looked down into his face.

"You're the first man ever said it to me like that," he said very gravely, and his lips were tight as he spoke, "and I think—I think you can count on me from now on."

Gabe Smith gave him his hand and smiled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Old man Hurley sat in his office alone and looked out of the single window which the place boasted. No other window was necessary, however, for it gave a clear view of the west over the whole expanse of valley-plain that was his one concern. It was his one concern in a business way, for he had been sent in as Dominion Land Agent just as soon as the new district had begun to attract settlers, and he was the sole member of the new community upon whom the dignity of governmental office of any kind rested. But it was his chief concern morally as well, for he felt the full weight of the responsibility that was his to carry the new adventure in settlement to a gratifying and successful issue.

The dignity of office rested gracefully upon Hugh Hurley. Genial and affable at the same time that he was business-like and practical, he was an unfailing source of healthy optimism and unshaken confidence in the future. He was not unaware of the stubborn difficulties that invariably attend the building up of any new settlement. But he had vision and was possessed of a spirit of idealism that read something of romance into everything he did.

In the thick of daily routine, in the midst of a confusion of maps and blue-prints and surveyor's reports and governmental rules and regulations, in his daily meeting with newcomers who had as yet suffered no disillusionment, and with disgruntled "old-timers" who had been in the district for as long as six months or even longer, in the thousand and one matters of detail that try the patience of any conscientious servant of the public, Hugh Hurley constantly cherished a vision. It was of a great fertile valley, flanked on either side by rising blue hills, teeming with an eager-hearted, virile population devoted to the soil, and standing as one more outpost of empire, one more living monument to high endeavour.

In the occasional hour of leisure that came to him during the day and af-

forded him an opportunity of sitting before his window, he gave his imagination free rein and allowed it to wander unchecked. Then it was that he saw the broad fields of grain swaying in the golden sun. He saw men moving about over ploughed fields with the rich, brown mould turned up to the light. He heard the singing of women and the happy laughter of children. He heard the ringing of the bells and the busy hum of life in little towns and villages that were as yet unborn. He saw the hillsides, now virgin and wild under the afternoon sun, blocked and squared and trimmed by the hands of busy workers. He saw a valley full-mantled and smiling, and mottled with shadows thrown down from drifting clouds. And all Hugh Hurley's energies were devoted to making his dreams come true.

But dreams are only dreams, after all. And to-day, as the old man sat before his window, he was worried. Winding down the dusty trail about a quarter of a mile away came a long line of men in foreign attire, long-skirted coats drawn in tightly at the belt, trouser-legs tucked into long boots, and round caps that fitted closely to the head. They were the Russian Doukhobors returning from an expedition in search of land. While they were still at a considerable distance he could hear the solemn, almost weird chanting of their hymn as they marched along in single file. Hurley had seen them before in similar guise and he had always been struck by the romance, the other-worldness of the picture they presented. To-day, however, the romance was not there. His mind was occupied with something more actual, more immediate. These men, and their wives and children too, would have to live during the next eight or ten months, most of which would be trying months of fiercely cold weather, and they were without resources of any kind. What new settlers in the valley, except that the Doukhobors' reliance on the Almighty to furnish them with food and shelter was as complete as it was pathetic. Hugh Hurley knew that he must immediately constitute himself the elected agent of Heaven itself for these people of a blind faith—and for the others a practical provider of means whereby the winter could be met and passed without regrets.

He was waiting now for Keith McBain, with whom he had discussed the problem, and from whom he hoped he might get some practical suggestions.

Keith had promised, at their last meeting to see him as soon as he had made some investigations on his own part. Only half an hour ago he had seen the old contractor come to town. But Keith McBain's first place of call—as it was also his last—was Mike Cheney's, and Hugh Hurley knew that he could only wait till the old man was ready to come.

One thing that had given Hurley cause for anxiety was the fact that during the week a number of the younger homesteaders had bidden the place good-bye, and had left for the outside, where they were going to remain until it was time to go on the land again in the spring. Hurley knew what that meant. A little more

of the same kind of thing and the movement would become general. The result would mean hardship and even suffering for the few who remained isolated from the outside during the long months of winter.

Two young fellows entered the open doorway behind Hurley and he turned to greet them.

"Hello, boys," he said cheerfully as he got up and went to meet them. "You're looking good—homesteading evidently sets a man up, eh?"

They smiled and shook hands.

"We're sure feelin' good," said one of them, "but we've had enough of homesteadin' for a little while—it gets on your nerves. We're goin' out for the winter."

"Going out for the winter?" Hurley exclaimed with a smile. "No—no, you're not—you're going to stay here this winter—and help out."

"Help out—at what?"

"Sit down there and smoke while I tell you a story."

When they were seated Hurley began.

"This reminds me of an argument I heard once between a pioneer preacher and a member of his congregation. This preacher was holding forth on hell, and after the service he met up with one of his freethinking brethren who didn't believe in hell, or heaven, either. 'So you don't believe in hell,' said the preacher. 'Well, mister, I'll tell you how I size it up. I'm betting on hell—an' I'm betting for two reasons. In the first place it's a good hunch—and in the second place I'm plum scared not to. It's like this,' he said. 'You say there ain't no hell an' you put your money on that hand. You just have to draw one card to find out. I say there is a hell an' I'm playin' that hand. An' I draw one. All right. You draw your card an' you turn it up. If you've played the right hunch what do you win? Nothin'. If there ain't no hell or heaven you're no better off even if you ain't worse off. You're just where you were. But if you're playing the wrong hunch an' you turn up your card an' find there's a sure 'nough hell—you're stuck. Ain't that right? You stand to win nothin' an' lose everything. Now look at me. I say there is a hell an' I draw an' turn up. If I don't make it—I don't lose anything anyhow. I'm no better off—but I'm sure no worse off. But if I turn up an' find there is a sure 'nough hell—I win, because that's my hunch an' I'm ready to play it, see? I stand to lose nothing an' there's just about one chance in two that I'll clean up with eternal life in the stakes. Any old way you look at it I got you beat—ain't that right? I'm bettin' on hell till the cows come home!'"

Hurley went and stood for a moment before the window and looked out across the valley.

"The point is this, boys," he said at last, turning quickly and looking at the two sturdy young fellows before him, "you and I and the rest of these people here"—he waved his hand towards the window—"have come into this valley be-

cause we believed in it. We're playing a kind of a hunch, boys, that the place is a good place to live in, an' when a man does what we've done he's playing pretty heavily. If we throw up the game now, we lose. That's all there is to it. And not only do we lose but these people around us lose too—and lose heavily. We've got to play the game through against hard luck and wait for the next spring before we begin to take our winnings."

"But we've got to live, Mr. Hurley," one of the men protested.

"Live—yes—and I've been working on that. And I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll grub-stake the whole caboodle of you for six months, beginning the middle of October, and I'll pay you a dollar a day for every day's work you put in if you hang on."

The men looked doubtful but were interested. "That looks all right," one of them offered, "but—"

"But nothing," interrupted Hurley. "I'll do what I say and I can make money on it too. I couldn't pay one man a dollar a day for a forenoon just now, but listen—this country's got to produce something if it's going to live, and it might as well start in this year as next. And when the rush comes in here next spring—and it's coming strong—there'll be a crowd of people here I hear about it every time the mail comes in. This town will be five times as big in a month. The man who's on the ground with his eyes open will take the winnings. The railway will be in before July, and the towns will be springing up and business will start and we'll be a part of the world we've just left before we know it. And that's only one side of it. You boys have registered your claims here and started improvements because you want to live here sometime. If it's going to be a fit place to live in we don't want any set-backs. Start to stampede for the outside now and by the time you get back you'll be where you were when you first landed here. That's not my idea. I'm going to stay right here and get ready for the big rush."

All at once they were aware of someone entering the office, and turned to find Keith McBain coming through the doorway. The young fellows got up at once and with a word to Hurley, promising to drop in the next day, left the office.

"Do you know what I've done?" said Hurley as soon as they had gone.

Keith McBain merely waited for a reply.

"I've promised those two boys work for the winter at a dollar a day and three square meals. I had to do it, Keith—they're good men, both of them, and they were on their way out for the winter. We can't let these men go. We've got to give them something to do and hold them here till spring."

"I've got it worked out," said Keith. "I was talking last week to McKenzie, and we can put in a camp just as soon as we can get a good location. They want a quarter to a half million ties for construction. There's a lot of stuff in there just south of the camp. All we've got to do is to go and find it and start right in. Any

of your men here know anything about cruising?"

As if by way of answer to this question King Howden rode up to the door and without getting down called for Hurley to bring out the mail bag. Hurley went to the door and invited him in. When King entered his eyes fell upon Keith McBain, and for a moment he paused and held out his hand. The old contractor's greeting was pleasant, and King went in and stood waiting for Hurley to speak.

"You did some work once in the lumber woods at the coast, King, didn't you?" Hurley asked him.

King's look expressed mild surprise. "A little," he said.

"Done some timber-cruising?"

"About all I did for three years—summer and winter," he answered.

"Well, you'd better spend an extra day or two on your trip this time. You'd better wait over until to-morrow morning and get ready. Take enough grub—they'll fix you up at the lodging-house—and a couple of blankets, and get a good start in the morning. We'd like you to take the old trail into the hills and then work your way east to the right-of-way. You might aim at coming out pretty close to the end of the steel. Use your own judgment. Anyhow, we want you to get a good location for a tie-camp for the winter. We have a contract and want to open on it as soon as the frost comes. What do you think about it?"

"I guess I can do that, sir," King replied quietly. "The mail will be a couple of days late, but—"

"Never mind about that, King," Hurley interrupted. "The mail can afford to wait over. Just get ready to spend as much time as it will take to do it right."

King turned and went out to set about his preparations for the trip into the hills.

As he started hastily down the street he brushed against someone standing near the entrance to Hurley's office. Looking back, he recognized Tom Rickard, one of Keith McBain's men, lounging lazily against the wall only a few feet from the doorway. The circumstance held no special significance for him at the time, and yet he couldn't help wondering why Rickard was in town.

In the office Hurley was standing before Keith McBain, who had remained perfectly silent during the interview with King. Hurley was regarding McBain seriously.

"What do you think of Howden?"

"He's a good boy," Keith remarked dryly.

"Couldn't he handle that camp for the winter—a little better than anyone around here?"

McBain did not say anything for some time, but sat meditatively smoking his pipe. Finally he seemed to have reached a conclusion.

"He's a good boy, Hugh," he remarked slowly, "but he's got to be more than

that before he can handle a gang of men in a bush. He's got to have the stomach!"

Hurley went to his window and looked out. In his own mind he was turning over the possibility of getting King to prove himself worthy of the confidence he felt. He had heard the men talk of the affair with McCartney, and he knew pretty well what was in Keith McBain's mind.

King's preparations were made quickly, and by supper time he was ready to take the trail next morning. He had yet to go back to his cabin for a couple of blankets, but he waited till later in the evening, and decided that he would spend the night in his shack and start from there early in the morning. He took supper at the lodging-house in company with Keith McBain, who was in one of his silent moods, having already spent too much time in the company of Mike Cheney during the afternoon. With them was Tom Rickard, as silent and uncommunicative as Keith McBain. From the knowledge that King had of the old contractor's ways he feared he was out on another of his lengthy visits to town. And King's mind went back immediately to Cherry, who was probably even then waiting anxiously for her father's return.

The first hours of such a visit on the part of Keith McBain were usually spent in secret with Mike Cheney, and invariably produced a mood in which he refused to speak to anyone. When they sat down to the table, King asked him when he intended going back to camp. The old man offered not a word by way of reply, and the meal went forward without any further conversation between the two. Anne came and went frequently during the short half hour that King spent at the table, or stood a little back from him and offered a few words now and then which King responded to briefly but pleasantly enough. The two young fellows who had visited Hurley's office earlier in the afternoon to announce their intention of going out for the winter had eaten earlier in the evening, and had apparently spoken of their plans in Anne's hearing. She had something to say about it herself—but she waited till Keith McBain had gone out and disappeared up the street, followed by Tom Rickard. Then she spoke of the thing that was on her mind.

"They're sure in luck," she remarked as if she were thinking aloud. "This place gives me the blues. Talk about a dead place—this ain't no town, it's a graveyard! It's worse than that—it's a prayer-meetin' without the shoutin'!"

King laughed quietly to himself, and Anne turned to him. "Honest, King, it ain't no place for white people to live. It's been all right this summer with everybody round and things movin' a little—but the winter—an everybody away—God, you don't know how I hate the idea."

King got up from the table and went to the doorway. It had already begun

to grow dusk and the air was cool and inviting. For a moment he stood looking into the street with its rambling houses and squat little cabins on either side.

"Anne," he said slowly, "some of us have to stay, I guess—stay here and see it through. It won't be easy—but it's the right thing to do—that's how I see it. Besides, it may be better than we think—wait and see."

While he talked his eyes were still turned towards the street. He did not look at the girl until he was through. Then he turned to her and looked at her where she stood, leaning against the table. Her eyes were on his face, and her gaze was long and steady. He had a suspicion that there were tears ready to come—there was something deeper and more thoughtful in them than he had ever seen there before. He knew that the girl was lonely, and that she had no friends.

"Anne," he said slowly, in a voice that was kindness itself, "you ought to get out more—you ought to ride out a little. You ought to walk."

She smiled and gave an impatient shrug to her shoulders.

"Walk—Lord!" Then she set about clearing the table and for a while both were silent. At last she set down a dish she held in her hand and came over to where King stood in the doorway.

"Haven't I walked?" she said in a voice that was tense with emotion. "Haven't I spent hours alone walking these trails up and down? That doesn't help any. I came in here because I wanted to get away by myself an' start all over again. Lord, I sure did it—I got away by myself all right. An' I got sick of it. Then I wanted to get out with people—honest-to-God-people that cared a little—no matter who. But where can I go? They think there's something wrong because I got into Mike's place the night of the scrap. They didn't like my way round here before that. Well, it's my way, isn't it? It's all I got. I don't owe anything—I'm square. But I want some one that will talk to me—an' talk right—not like a lot of these fellows want to talk. That's what I want."

King put out his hand and took her arm. "I guess that's right, Anne," he said. "I've felt like that. We'll talk—you and I—talk together sometimes. And then maybe—" he began to think of the possibility of Anne coming to know Cherry McBain.

"I've been wantin' to talk to you often," she said, very quietly and very slowly. "But you seemed to pass me up like the rest of them. Only I liked you because you looked square. An' I was afraid to talk to you—because I wanted you to like me."

For a moment King was silent as he weighed the full meaning of her words. He felt the pressure of her hand on his arm as she spoke, and there crept over him a strange feeling of fear. He liked the girl, he had the deepest sympathy for her, he would do anything in his power to make life more pleasant for her. And

yet—he shrank slowly from her touch and was impatient to get away.

“I guess it’ll be late enough when I get back,” he said suddenly. “And I’ve got to make a good start for the hills to-morrow.”

He turned and looked at her for a moment, and then laid his hand on her shoulder. “We’ve got to face a lot of things in life, Anne,” he said; “a whole lot of things. It ain’t always easy—but it pays to face up.”

He stood before her in the doorway and looked directly into her face as he spoke. For a moment she returned the look and then suddenly bowed her head before him. Putting his arm about her shoulders he raised her head gently and looked at her.

“Anne, girl,” he said slowly, “I’m coming to see you—if it would help any—when I get back. So long!”

She looked at him squarely and he knew she understood him. The fear he had entertained only a moment before was gone now. He was confident that everything between them was just as he wanted it to be. In her heart was a deep yearning for companionship—in his, a feeling of great pity for the girl who was struggling against the demon of loneliness.

“King,” she said at last, “you’re right—and I like that.”

A sound of hoofs came suddenly from the trail only a few yards away. Anne stepped back quickly from the doorway and King turned to face Cherry McBain, who had brought her horse to a standstill and was already looking down at him from her place in the saddle. He was about to express his surprise, but the look she gave him caused the words to die on his lips.

“I’m looking for my father,” she said in a voice that to King’s ears sounded like the voice of a stranger.

The sound of men’s voices came from farther up the street, and looking out, King saw Hugh Hurley and Keith McBain leaving the land-office. Cherry saw the men at the same moment and without a word rode away to join her father. Just once King called after her, but received no reply. He watched them till all three had vanished in the direction of Hurley’s little house that stood under the poplars at the end of the street. Then he stepped out and went off down the trail to where his horse was tethered outside Hurley’s office.

When he had mounted into his saddle he turned and looked back along the street. In the dusky frame of the lodging-house doorway he could see Anne still standing where he had left her. She waved her hand to him as he looked back at her, and he waved in reply as he drew his horse’s head about and took the trail

that led westward to his cabin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

King Howden was at a loss to understand himself that night. Into a few short days had been crowded more emotion, more stirring experience than he had ever known before. The very fact that there had been nothing spectacular, nothing especially thrilling, in what had occurred only made the effects more far-reaching and real. A change had come over him that was the result of forces working so deeply within him that he knew life from this time forward was to mean something different, something more serious than it had ever meant to him.

When he arrived at his cabin, after putting his horse away for the night and making a few final preparations for an early start in the morning, he found his bunk strangely uninviting. His mind, was unusually busy turning over and over a host of thoughts that crowded upon one another in a confusion that made sleep impossible. He went to the doorway of his shack, and sitting on the doorstep drew his dog down beside him and tried to think himself clear of the confusion. He recalled the night he had learned of his brother's death—it seemed as if a year had gone since that night, instead of a week. His imagination dwelt upon Cherry McBain as she looked that night when she rode beside him on the trail. His heart bounded again as he saw her standing before him on the little bridge over the White Pine—and he felt again, as he had felt a hundred times since, the ecstasy of that moment when Cherry had asked him for his help against a man he already hated. He smiled at the recollection of his meeting with McCartney in Cheney's place. Then his heart froze as he thought of what had happened only within the last hour.

As he sat alone on the doorstep the night came down on the hills and the valley, but King had no thought of the passing hours. His mind was on the sudden appearance of Cherry McBain, like an apparition out of the dusk, and the coldly accusing note in her voice when she had spoken.

"She couldn't think—" he murmured to himself and then stopped.

He wondered that he had not gone off to find her—to follow her and explain it all. And then it occurred to him that words—his words particularly—were helpless things after all. Even if he had gone and found her, and spoken to her, what would his words have done? And yet—he clung fiercely to a hope—the hope that

had so lately been born in him.

"She can't think I'm wrong," he went on. "She can't—I couldn't stand that. I've been trying—I'm not right all through, but I'm not wrong like that. She's got to believe me."

And then it came upon him—came with crystal clearness—that the heart of Cherry McBain could be won and held only by a man that was not afraid of himself, a man who had a task so great that it overshadowed petty problems and made them insignificant by comparison. And so King Howden renewed the covenant he had made with himself only a few days before, that his place in life was something more than the small circle drawn about his narrow existence, with its little weaknesses and discouragements and failures. Only this time the covenant was made sacred because a man's love for a woman had set its seal on it.

By the first streak of dawn King was already well along the trail. He wanted to reach the top of the hills by sunrise, and with a climb of some five or six miles before him he urged his horse forward at a good pace. From the low-lying levels of the grassy plain and the deep meadows, to the first rolling uplands he mounted while the dawn was still gray, and from the uplands to the hills and down through the valleys that lay between. The old trail had not been used much during the latter part of the summer owing to the steadily decreasing distance that now lay between the new settlement and the end of the steel. On either side and in the centre of the trail where ran the narrow ridge between the two tracks, the grass was high and drenched the horse's legs with dew.

And as he mounted higher, the coming of the new day broke upon him like a benediction, so that his very soul sang with the joy of the open sky and the rolling hills, the free trail and the throbbing pulse of youth. When he reached the top of the first upstanding hill he emerged from the fringe of trees that lined the crest just in time to see the sun pushing its way above the horizon. In the valley that lay before him the morning mist was stretched low and motionless. On the hillside opposite, where the sun's rays had not yet found their way, the trees were hidden in the half-dusk like ghosts waiting for some voice to waken them. The trail that led before him lost itself under cover of the white shroud, and over all was poured the rich glory of the rising sun. King took off his hat and looked long and silently. Then facing northward he dismounted and, taking the bridle rein in one hand, left the trail and plunged into the woods.

Early that night he found a circle of tamaracs beside a little stream of cold water and decided to put up for the night. The day had been a long one, and had proven very heavy, but he had succeeded in his quest and was content with the results of his efforts. He was very tired, and after removing the saddle and pack from his horse he found a grassy plot not far away and tethered him for the night.

Then he prepared a little smudge at the edge of the plot and returned to his camp. When he had eaten his supper he unstrapped his blankets and tossed them in a loose roll upon the soft ground where it was covered with brown needles and dry cones. Then he rolled himself a cigarette and smoked it in silence while he thought over the results of his day's cruising.

The sun had already gone down when he got up and went again to make sure that his horse had received all the attention necessary for the night. When he had satisfied himself that everything was as it should be, and had partly smothered the smudge in order that its usefulness might last well through the night, he turned back up the hill again to roll in for the night. A passing mood caused him to circle about so that he came out on a small elevation, clear of trees, that stood back from his camp.

When he had reached the top of the hill he could see clear away to the west over the broad valley where lay the town and his own little cabin that he had left early that morning. He thought he could make out the place, off to the north, where lay the right-of-way and Keith McBain's construction camp. Then as his eyes swept the intervening space something arrested his attention.

Everywhere were the slow-forming mists of the early evening. But down there to the right—it couldn't be more than a mile away—there was something that was not mist, though it was difficult to make it out, even at so short a distance, with the shadows already beginning to deepen in the lower places. What he saw was a slowly rising thin column of smoke, and his heart beat faster as he began to realize slowly what it might mean. Someone was down there making a camp for the night. There was no reason in the world for anyone wandering through the hills at such a time—unless it was the same reason that had brought King Howden himself there. It was not easy to explain, but he was not slow in coming to a decision to act. Merely as a matter of self-defence he determined that he should at least guard against being discovered.

He hurried down the hill, sliding, leaping, and running by turns, and came in a few seconds to the edge of the little meadow where his horse was standing in the comfortable protection of the cloud of smoke rising from the smudge.

"You poor old cuss," he said regretfully, "you'll have to use your tail to keep the mosquitoes off to-night. No more smoke, if they eat you alive."

With that he kicked the smudge-pile vigorously, scattering it over the ground and leaving the embers smoking feebly where they lay in the grass. Then he went carefully from one spot to another and stamped out the last traces of the fire. Going back to the spot he had chosen for the night he left Sal on guard with a word of warning not to follow him, and set off again in the direction in which he had discovered the smoke. He had no intention of attempting to satisfy his curiosity by spying on strangers. He wanted to be reasonably sure that he himself

was not being spied upon—that was all.

And so he moved about cautiously and waited patiently for the first sound that would announce the approach of anyone. When it was very late and he had heard nothing to alarm him, he returned, confident that he would not be molested, and rolling himself in his blankets, pillowed his head on the saddle and went to sleep.

The next morning he was awake at dawn, and without waiting to prepare breakfast, he clambered up the hill behind his camping place and sat down to watch for the first signs of life in the camp below. And as he sat and waited he worked out in his own mind, now fresh from the night's sound sleep under the open sky, what was at least a tentative explanation of the new circumstance that had so suddenly forced itself into his plans. He remembered now, with a new sense of its possible significance, the unexpected arrival in town of Cherry McBain late in the evening. Why had she come for her father? Then he recalled the fact that Keith McBain had not come to town alone. Was there any special significance in the presence of Tom Rickard in town at the same time? There was nothing in Keith McBain's silence that was unusual to one who knew him, but King felt that the old contractor had been more than ordinarily silent and perhaps a little ill-natured. He could not help thinking that something was brewing behind it all and, right or wrong, his conviction was that the camp down there a mile or so away had some connection with it all.

Suddenly he was aware of a column of white smoke rising out of the trees. The traveller was apparently making ready for an early start. King sat watching the smoke for nearly an hour before anything happened to which he could attach any special importance. Then the figures of two men appeared suddenly in the open space beside the trees. They were leading a couple of horses. He got to his feet as he saw them and then squatted down suddenly and drew Sal towards him, lest she should catch a glimpse of the strangers and set up an alarm.

The figures were headed southward, in the direction from which King had come the day before. For several minutes he watched them without moving from his place. Then as they disappeared from view behind the shoulder of a hill he scrambled down the slope to his camp and went about leisurely to prepare his breakfast. If the strangers were on a similar errand to his own he was well ahead of them. Before evening he would have completed his cruising in the hills and with ordinary good luck would reach the end of the steel by night-fall. When he had breakfasted he completed a few preparations necessary for the day's trip and was on his way again at sunrise.

Late in the afternoon he emerged upon the trail about half-way between McBain's camp and the end of the steel. The air was heavy with a promise of rain in it. For the last mile or so he had followed a creek in which only a small

stream of water trickled over the stones, and now, the wearisome part of the day's work done, he sat down upon a log at the side of the road and sized up the work he had done during the last two days in the hills. The timber was there for the purposes that Hurley and Keith McBain sought, the supply was more than their needs called for, and he had found an admirable site for a camp.

It was with a feeling of great satisfaction, therefore, that he finally got into the saddle and started for the end-of-the-steel.

Late that evening King strolled leisurely in the direction of the railway siding where stood a long line of cars that served as sleeping quarters for the men who were attached to the bridge gang. For a month or more they had been busy replacing the old temporary bridge by a more permanent structure. From a distance he had heard the voices of the men chatting and laughing among themselves. The two days spent alone in the hills had awakened in him afresh the desire to be with men and hear them talk.

He came upon them at an interesting moment. Two men of the gang were matched in a wrestling bout, the others standing round watching the contest closely. King waited at some distance until the affair was over before he made his presence known. Then he stepped forward and entered the circle of men. Good nature pervaded the group, and King was the recipient of pleasant greetings from all sides. On the opposite side of the circle stood Larkin, Keith McBain's freighter.

"Hey, you outsiders—Larkin and Howden," called one of the men; "you fellows can't sit in on this game for nothin'. Give us a little action. Even money that Howden can put Larkin on his back in three minutes."

"Any takers?" asked Larkin, during the pause that followed this outburst.

Almost immediately came a dozen responses, whether from lack of confidence in King's ability or from sheer desire for sport.

King felt himself pushed out into the centre of the circle, where he stood smiling and looking at Larkin.

"Get in, Larkin," cried a voice. "No time now for lettin' your blood freeze in your veins. I'm backin' you to win and by — you've got to step lively."

Larkin was smiling as he got up, but the smile gave place to a look of deadly earnestness as he leaped suddenly at King in an effort to overcome him at one rush. King was still smiling as he braced himself and received the full force of Larkin's rush without yielding more than half a step. Then as Larkin bent low to get a hold, King caught him quickly about the waist and, lifting him off his feet, held him for a moment while he kicked and lurched helplessly in an effort to free himself. In another second he had Larkin on the ground with his shoulders pinned down.

The whole thing had not occupied a minute, and there was not a man in the group that did not express his surprise at the sudden and unexpected outcome

of the encounter. King, on his part, felt a strange new thrill of pleasure as he got up and looked round at the men. At no time during his little set-to with Larkin had he doubted his ability to take care of himself, but the sharp action, though momentary, had exhilarated him and he was conscious of the renewed vigor that had come to him during the two days wandering in the hills.

Back in the group of men stood one big fellow, a Spaniard of powerful build and hasty temper, whom no one in the gang had ever pretended to know. There was a look in his eyes now, however, that attracted and even amused King. Someone else apparently saw that look at the same moment.

"You, Spain," came a voice. "Feelin' pretty strong? Get in there and stack up. You and Howden mate up pretty close."

"Go on—get in, Spain," came from another quarter, and at once the big Spaniard, serious and struggling to control his excitement, became the centre of interest. With a deal of urging, they finally got him to step out—not very reluctantly, it seemed, for he came towards King rather eagerly.

"I don't know, young fellow," he said seriously as he came forward. "By golly, I t'ink I lika try dat for once anyhow."

He advanced warily and tried to get his huge arms about King's body. King, however, avoided him by moving back a step at a time about the enclosure until the look of seriousness in the Spaniard's face became one of impatience, and King knew that the moment had arrived when he must close with his antagonist and fight it out. His decision had barely been made, however, when the Spaniard made a quick movement towards him and King had to leap to one side quickly to avoid the powerful arms that came out to encircle him. The movement left him slightly in the rear and to one side of his opponent, and stepping in quickly he sent his arm forward and upward, and laying his hand on the back of the Spaniard's neck brought his head down with a snap. In another ten seconds he had doubled him up and thrown him on the ground.

When the Spaniard got to his feet his black eyes were flashing angrily, and he was muttering incoherently as he looked at King. The latter, however, was smiling with such genuine good nature that at last the fire died in the black eyes and the big fellow began to smile at his own defeat.

"By golly, young fellow," he said, "I lika know dat little treek, jus' once."

King found a place for himself in the circle of men and moved quietly to the outside where he would be less in evidence. The centre of the circle was taken almost immediately by a couple of men who had come out to prove their prowess at "squaw-wrestling."

While the interest in the match was at its height, King felt someone touch his arm, and looking round, found himself face to face with Lush Currie, who, with one finger on his lips as a signal for silence, was beckoning King to come

out of the crowd and follow him. King withdrew at once without attracting any attention, and followed Currie until he came up with him just a few yards off on the roadway.

When King had joined him he walked along in silence for a short distance, expecting Currie to speak.

"I just came from up the line," said Currie at last. "I didn't know you were here—where'd you come from?"

King hesitated a moment before he replied. The glimpses he had caught early that morning of the two men in the hills set him thinking during the day, and he was determined to be careful.

"I came from town," he said in reply to Currie's question.

"Yes—but—but when?"

"To-day. Got here in time for supper."

"Got here to-night? You didn't come from McBain's camp to-day?"

King's reply was ready. "No—I took another way this time. But what—"

"I think you'd better put back," Currie broke in. "McCartney's got somethin' movin'. Old Silent's in town—been there for three days now—probably livin' at Cheney's. The girl went up but came back this morning without him. I don't know what's doin', but Gabe says Bill's got some of Cheney's firewater an' there's goin' to be trouble. Gabe was wishin' to-day you'd come along. He expected you back when the girl came and when you didn't turn up he was worried. He says the girl's worried too."

They walked some distance before King made any comment. At last he turned off in the direction of the corral where he had put his horse for the night.

"I guess I'll be gettin' along back," he said quietly.

Lush Currie stood and watched him until he had vanished in the darkness. And even as he stood there, the rain that had been threatening all day began to fall slowly.

CHAPTER NINE

Cherry McBain stood in the open doorway of the cabin and looked out at the heavy grey skies and the gathering darkness. The air carried a chill reminder that summer was coming very rapidly to a close. All day long there had been a cold wind and scudding clouds that drifted low about the hill tops, and hurried

before a fitful eastern breeze that carried dashes of mist and thin rain with it.

Now that evening had come the wind had gone down, but the drizzling rain was falling steadily and monotonously, as it does when it sets in for a long down-pour. Though it was still early evening it was almost dusk, especially among the heavy-limbed tamaracs where the cabin stood. Cherry had lighted the lamp very early in an effort to bring some little cheer to the place, for the heavy unbroken gloom of the skies, now growing dark with the coming night, had filled her with a sense of loneliness from which she could not free herself.

It was not merely the fact that she was twenty-one and that the day had been a dull one, though perhaps a girl of Cherry McBain's temperament needs no other excuse for being melancholy. She was lonely, more indescribably lonely than she had ever been in her life before. The distance from happiness to despair is often a very short one indeed, and Cherry had gone from one to the other in what, to her, was an incredibly short time. The latter weeks of the summer just coming to a close had been the most supremely happy time of her life. But the last two or three days had been like long dreary months to her. It seemed as if she had been given but one short glimpse of bright hope only to be plunged again into deepest darkness. At first it was wounded pride that gave her pain. She loved King Howden—what hurt her most was the fact that she loved him still in spite of herself. Now that she recalled the way she had spoken to King, and then recalled what she had seen when she came unexpectedly upon Anne and King standing together in the deeper dusk of the doorway—she bit her lip and clenched her hands in anger at herself that she should have allowed herself to be such a fool.

It was this wounded pride of hers that had unsettled her so that she was unable to play her wonted part when she had finally tried to make her father come back to her. He had met her suggestion with a stormy outburst—worse than any he had ever brought upon her before—and she had broken miserably before it, and had left him and ridden back to the camp alone. What did it matter that she had walked up and down the crooked street of The Town for two days with as firm a step and as erect a bearing as ever? What did it matter that she had tossed her head proudly and passed Anne without so much as a word of recognition whenever the two met? What did it matter that she had ridden into camp with the same air of indifference that she had always carried? Others might not know—and she vowed they would not know—but she knew that she had suffered a double defeat, and it hurt.

But Cherry McBain was not one to forget her duty even in the hour of keenest disappointment. Her sense of defeat had been partly relieved during the day in the time-honored way that women have of relieving their feelings. Now as she stood in the doorway of her cabin and looked out at the grey world, she

was the victim of a feeling that she had never really experienced before. She was afraid.

During the day she had spoken with old Gabe Smith, who had come to get news from her of her father. A change had come over the camp during the past few days, the nature of which had made Gabe very anxious to have Keith McBain back again and asserting his old control. He did not have to tell Cherry that Bill McCartney was the cause of all the unrest he had reported to her. She knew the meaning of it better than Gabe. Cherry longed for her father's return. She even upbraided herself for having left town without him.

But even as she prayed for his coming, strange doubts arose in her mind concerning her father's power to combat the hostile forces of which McCartney was not only the director but the creator as well. She knew, in short, as others doubtless knew, that Keith McBain was a broken man. His power to break a man's will by a look or a word was almost gone, and none knew it so well as his own daughter.

And yet she wanted him back. After all, she had always relied upon him in critical moments in the past; it had come to be a habit with her. Besides, there was no one else to whom she could turn. Old Gabe Smith was kind and good, and would always help to the extent of his ability, but after all he was of no more use than any other camp follower when a crisis had to be met.

While she stood wondering what best to do she saw Gabe himself coming down the pathway towards her. All at once her mind was made up. With a word or two to Gabe she went back into the cabin and dressed herself preparatory to going out. In a few minutes she was back again in the doorway waiting for Gabe, who reappeared presently in the pathway leading Cherry's horse behind him, saddled and bridled, ready for the road. She allowed Gabe to help her into the saddle, and then, leaving him to blow out the light and close the door, she set off to the trail and headed for The Town. This time she was determined that her father's will should be no match for her own. She would have her way with him, no matter what he said, and he would return to camp with her and give commands.

No one saw her as she rode through the camp, no one, at least, spoke to her, and in a couple of minutes she was safely through with nothing before her but a long stretch of winding trail already wet from the rain. She went forward with great caution though she knew every foot of the trail she was traversing, and urged her horse only in the higher stretches where the road was sandy and still dry. The footing was very uncertain in spots, and on account of the increasing intensity of the darkness she was forced to rely almost wholly upon the instincts of her horse to guide her. Fortunately there was but one trail, and that one was flanked on either side by bushes and trees and fallen logs that made an effective

barrier against her wandering from the beaten way.

One thing that caused her some concern as she rode along was the fact that the little creeks she had crossed countless times before, had crossed scarcely twelve hours since, as a matter of fact, had swollen considerably during the day. Every time she attempted a fording she did so with an increasing sense of surprise at the swirling of the water about her horse's legs. She knew it had been raining in the hills during the day, and she had expected some little change in the size of the streams, but nothing so formidable as the turbulent rushing of these little creeks had presented itself to her imagination. They were actually vicious, she thought to herself, and once when the water reached her foot and her horse stopped a moment and leaned against the current before he went on, she was more than a little anxious for the outcome of her mission. She experienced a strange thrill of something like fear, too, as she looked down at the water beneath her, black under the darkness of the night, and swirling and rushing crazily onward in headlong haste.

She had been on the way for nearly three hours when she came at last to the little ridge overlooking White Pine river. It was the prospect of having to make this crossing that gave her most concern. From the top of the ridge she could see nothing in the pitchy blackness of the night. Cautiously she urged her horse down the gentle slope of the ridge towards the river. She began to wonder whether the little bridge of poles had been swept out by the current. If the water had not risen above the level of the bridge there was no reason why a perfectly safe crossing could not be made. With the instinct born of long contact with the world out-of-doors she strove to measure the distance she had gone since she left the ridge crest. The bridge was some distance off yet, probably fifteen or twenty yards, when all at once she thought she heard the sound of water running about her horse's fore-feet. She urged him forward a little, and found herself standing some ten yards or so from the bridge with the water rushing just beneath her. Dimly in the darkness she could make out the form of the bridge. It was still in its place with the water rushing past at either end, though it had not gone over it as yet.

For a moment she stopped and faced the situation, and the new problems it presented to her. She had no doubt that she could cross the bridge quite safely and finish her trip successfully. But if it continued to rain during the night, there would be no getting back again. With the camp cut off from them, she and her father would simply have to wait until the rain ceased and the rivers went down sufficiently to allow a safe passage before they could think of returning. But that was like enlisting Providence on the side of the devil, for she knew it would be simply playing into the hands of McCartney to leave the camp in his charge, perhaps for days, while the wet weather made it impossible for the men to work

on the grade. Though she did not know what she could do if she were alone at the camp, she felt intuitively that while her father was away her duty was to fill the place he had left, if she could do nothing but stand as a sort of symbol of the leadership which her father had embodied.

She decided to abandon the trip to The Town and to return to camp, there to match her wits against those of McCartney, and hope for the best. The decision quickly made was suddenly shaken by the fear that her father might even now be on the road. As she thought of him attempting to cross the White Pine alone with only his team to take care of him, she shrank with fear. She recalled the nights during the summer when his team had brought him safely home, though he himself had never known anything about it until he awoke the next morning. But good fortune cannot bring a man through everything, and Cherry knew her father could never cross the White Pine in its present condition and under the heavy darkness that hid everything within a few feet.

Turning her horse's head back she rode again up the slope of the ridge and dismounted when she was about half way to the crest. Here she found a fallen log in the shelter of a closely grown clump of trees and sat down. She was far enough from the river to hear quite easily other sounds than the rushing of the water. Above her the trees brushed back and forth in the wind, with boughs rustling and creaking and moaning in the darkness. The sound from the river was like the low, steady washing of a distant surf. Cherry sat and strained her ears for the least noise from the other side of the bridge. Time after time she started up at what she thought was the striking of a hoof or the scraping of a wheel upon a stone. Once she got to her feet suddenly, her heart thumping with expectancy. She was sure she had heard her father's voice in a gruff word of command to his team. But although she stood with breath held and ears strained for the slightest sound, none came, and she sat down again, feeling that she might have been dreaming.

When she at last arose to take the trail back to the camp it was past midnight. Nothing had come of her long wait and she felt it would be useless to remain longer. No one would have allowed even Keith McBain to leave town on such a night and at an hour that would make the trip to camp doubly hazardous.

But as she went over the top of the ridge and rode along the trail she had come over earlier in the night she began to estimate the difficulty of the problem that awaited her if her fears concerning McCartney's designs had any foundation in fact.

She knew the hour must come sooner or later when McCartney would give up his policy of quiet waiting. She knew something of his determination and recklessness of consequences. She knew he would strike when he thought the moment most opportune. And she was not blind to the fact that the moment was

perhaps at hand. He would carry out his threat some time—why should he not do so to-night?

Cherry McBain had never been afraid of Bill McCartney; she had usually managed to meet him when the other men were around, or when her father was near, and she had successfully avoided anything but the most casual passages between them. Her chief security had lain in the fact that she had always been on the best of terms with the men of her father's camp. She liked them and she knew they liked her. But she did not fail to recognize that McCartney's chief concern during the last few weeks had been to win for himself the regard of the men and make them his followers. That he had won a small group through the fear he had inspired by his display of brute strength Cherry well knew. Just how far he had been successful among the more independent men of the camp she did not know. Gabe Smith had often spoken to her about it, and had assured her of the loyalty of the great majority of them, but she knew that Gabe's judgment on such things was not always to be relied upon. It was this uncertainty that made her afraid. She was actually afraid for herself. Without the active support of the men in her father's camp she would be powerless against a man of McCartney's temper, to say nothing of his size, and she dreaded the moment when he would step up and demand that she should do her part to make good her father's bargain.

She knew at any rate what the future held for her if the worst came to the worst. She would fight as long as she had strength left in her body and wit in her mind. If she failed at last it would be for her father's sake, at least, and she would harbour no regrets and cherish no grudge. Suddenly, as she rode along in deep thought, she was awakened from her dreaming by the sight of a red flare in the clouded night-sky. It appeared directly ahead of her, a large spot of ruby light glowing against the low clouds. She knew what it meant only too well, but the fear of what its full meaning might be sent a chill to her heart as she looked at it. Then she gave her horse a sharp cut with her quirt and he was off at a mad gallop along the muddy trail.

The caution she had exercised in picking her way along through the darkness was suddenly forgotten. The horse would have to do the best it could to find a footing and keep the trail. One thought only occupied her mind. The camp was on fire and she must save it, if she could cover the distance in time.

About half an hour of the maddest riding she had ever done brought her to the edge of the camp where the trail left the grade and emerged from the bushes beside the corral. In the middle of the camp the men were dancing about the flaming remnants of what had been the cook camp. It had been nothing but a frame of logs and canvas, and had gone up like so much dry kindling in a few minutes. What she saw was nothing more than a heap of burning debris, about which the men were running and shouting like beings half-crazed.

At first Cherry stood at a distance, scarcely knowing what to do. Three workless days had produced the kind of results that she had long since learned to expect in construction camps. With McCartney on the ground she knew the results were inevitable. The men were nearly all drunk and many of them scarcely seemed to know what they were doing.

All at once she saw the swaggering form of McCartney in the light from the fire. The sight maddened her and with a flash of her quirt she sent her horse flying into the crowd, pulling him back suddenly almost upon his haunches at the very edge of the fire.

Her sudden appearance like an apparition out of the night struck surprise into the hearts of the men. They fell back, some of them with terror on their faces as she struck, first on one side, then on the other, at a couple who approached her in threatening attitude.

"Get to your bunks, you!" she cried in a voice that all could hear and in a tone that none could mistake.

Moving quickly about, she called to a half dozen men whom she knew best and liked, among them Gabe Smith.

"Stay here for a little while," she said after she had got them together. "Look round at the store and the corral and the bunkhouse to make sure there is no more danger of fire. Gabe, you take charge for to-night, and get these men to help. Make the others go to bed."

In half an hour the camp was in a state of comparative quiet. Nothing was left of the cook-camp but a heap of embers smouldering in the rain which was still falling steadily. Cherry found Gabe in the bunkhouse patiently arguing with three or four of the men who had ill-temperedly protested against going to bed at the command of anyone, much less that of a woman. She called him out to her.

"Let them sit up if they like, Gabe," she said with a smile. "The less trouble the better. Two or three of you had better stay round till daylight anyhow. I'm going to the cabin. I'll take my horse along and tether him under the tamaracs. If anything happens let me know. I'll lie down. The lamp will be lit, and I'll be ready to come out at once if you need me. Some one must go to town in the morning."

Gabe came up to her as she was about to leave.

"There's one thing, my girl," he said. "You'd better not leave your door unlocked. I can knock—"

"Don't be silly, Gabe," she interrupted quickly. "I'm not afraid."

"Well, take this," he said, drawing a revolver from his pocket and holding it towards her.

"Why, Gabe," she exclaimed, laughing at him, "what in the world are you going to do with that?"

"Nothing, I hope," he replied a little sheepishly. "Lush Currie left it with me as a kind of remembrance and I've been keeping it by me."

"But you'd never use it, Gabe?"

"No," he replied with a slow smile as he slipped it back again into his pocket, "but it does give a man a comfortable feeling to have it on him, in case."

She bade him good-night cheerfully and rode off towards the cabin. Although she had been amused at what she thought was an unnecessary precaution for Gabe Smith to take, she could not help admitting to herself that she shared somewhat in the feeling of comfort which the old fellow protested was his chief reason for carrying the weapon. She regretted, moreover, that she had not asked him concerning the whereabouts of McCartney. He had disappeared suddenly when she had come upon the scene. The first glimpse she had had of him was the last, and she felt a little uneasiness at not knowing where he had gone. It had come to her mind frequently during her conversation with Gabe that she should ask him to find McCartney and keep an eye on him, but she did not wish the old man to know what was in her mind. As she rode into the tamaracs, however, and tethered her horse in a sheltered spot, she wished with all her heart that she had given at least a hint of her fears to Gabe. But perhaps he had already guessed at them for himself—there was a little comfort in the hope that he had done so; and with this thought in her mind she entered the cabin.

When she had lighted her lamp she looked about her to assure herself that everything was just as she had left it. Then she smiled to herself as she remembered that she had probably never done such a thing before. She was actually nervous and the discovery really amused her.

Quickly she removed her wet garments, and having dressed again in warm, dry clothing, she lowered the light and, drawing a heavy cover about her, lay down on the couch and dropped to sleep almost instantly.

CHAPTER TEN

Cherry awoke with a start and sat up quickly, blinking her eyes in the dim light and struggling to regain control of her senses. Something had frightened her out of a heavy sleep. Now that she was awake she thought she remembered a sensation of a cold breath of air on her cheek. Suddenly her eyes fell upon a shadowy form standing beside the door. At first she was not sure but that she

had been dreaming. Gradually her mind cleared, however, and she sprang to her feet as she recognized the face of Bill McCartney looking at her from where he stood with his hand still upon the door-latch.

At the first sight of the intruder her heart seemed to stop beating and she faced him for a moment in silence. Then she stepped swiftly to the table and turned up the light. As she did so McCartney took his hand from the latch and turning his back to the door looked at her steadily, smiling and folding his arms.

"What do you want here?" Cherry asked in a voice that betrayed her nervousness in spite of her efforts to control herself.

McCartney remained silent, answering her only with a smile.

"What have you come here for at this time of night?" she asked again. Her voice was more steady now and she straightened up defiantly as she spoke. "Get out of here, or I'll have a dozen men——"

He took a step towards her and raised his hand for silence.

"Cherry," he said, "there ain't any use of you an' me disagreein'. You know that just as well as me. I come here now because I want to tell you something you ought to know for your own good. You don't let me talk to you like some others. I've got to take my own way of doin' things or I won't get them done at all, see? You go back there an' sit down. I'm goin' to talk an' I want you to listen."

He waited for Cherry to go back to the couch again, but she stood motionless by the table and looked at him for some time before she spoke. She knew she could gain nothing by rousing his anger. From the look in his eyes and the tone of his voice it was quite clear that he had been drinking. If she vexed him he might resort to ugly tactics in which she would be no match for him. Her only course was the one she had followed for weeks. She must fight for time in the hope that something might occur before she would have to admit defeat.

"I shall not sit down till you do," she said, pointing to a chair beside the door.

He looked behind him and then looked at her. What he saw in her face was enough to convince him that she was in earnest, at any rate, and he turned slowly, and going to the chair, sat down, taking his hat off as he did so and putting it on the floor beside him.

"Now, then," he said, as he looked up at her.

For reply Cherry moved the lamp to one side in order that it might not obstruct her view of McCartney from where she intended to sit, and going to the couch from which she had risen only a few minutes before, sat down and waited for him to speak.

"You ask me what brings me here so late," he began. "Don't you think that's a strange question to ask me? You an' me ain't talked much together lately, but when we had our last long talk together I thought you understood it clear enough.

An' I don't think you're the kind that forgets easy, either."

Cherry gave a little shrug of impatience and looked away from him, letting her eyes rest upon the floor at her feet.

"You asked me what I want—what I came here for," he went on. "Well, what's the use of mixin' words? You know—an' I ain't goin' to tell you unless you've forgot. But listen to me, Cherry." He lowered his voice as he spoke. "Bill McCartney is the best friend you've got. An' he's the best friend Keith McBain's got. Your father's an old man, but he's a wise man an' he knows some things his daughter can't understand. You ain't got a better friend than me, an' the sooner you get that straight the better off you'll be."

He paused as Cherry looked at him with more impatience than before.

"You don't need to tell me all this," she said. "I've thought it all over a hundred times. I want to know what you have come here for to-night. The rest can wait for some other time."

The smile left his face as she spoke, and he seemed on the point of getting up from his chair. "Well," he began, in a voice that was pitched much higher than before, "I'm here to tell you this for one thing. There's a kind of arrangement between you an' me. You know all about that. There's goin' to be trouble for anyone who tries to spoil that arrangement. You understand?"

Cherry professed ignorance of the significance of his words.

"Don't tell me you don't know," he protested quickly. "I've got eyes to see with, an' if I hadn't there's lot's more that has, an' it ain't hard to find out what's goin' on. There's someone breakin' into my game an' he's got to get out an' stay out."

"Who?" Cherry asked in a voice that was almost coquettish.

"Who?" he blustered. "For God's sake—who?"

"Yes," she insisted, "who?"

"Howden—that's who."

She did not show the slightest disturbance, but laughed a little to herself as she looked again at the floor.

"No," she said, "you're wrong. King Howden and I are not even good friends any more."

He looked at her in surprise. "That ain't true," he said.

She raised her eyes quickly. "You have never known me to lie over anything," she replied. "You wouldn't expect me to lie over this."

He grunted to himself and regarded her strangely. "Then I'm goin' ahead with that in mind," he said. "Am I doin' right?"

"I can only speak for myself," she replied. "I don't know what's in King Howden's mind."

"I don't give a—" He checked himself in an effort, apparently, to be polite.

"I don't worry about what's in his mind," he said. "I'll look after him, an' I'm goin' to settle with him myself."

He paused for some time and Cherry took advantage of the pause to draw about her shoulders the cover that lay on the couch where it had fallen when she had first got up.

"And is that all?" she asked.

"That's all on that—just now," he said. "There's just one more thing I want to say—just a little warnin' I want to give you. I don't want you interferin' with things in the camp. That's no place for you. You jumped in to-night where you wasn't wanted an' you got away with it—but it ain't goin' to happen again."

"But my father is away and—"

"That's just the point, now," he broke in. "If you just let things go along in their natural way nothin' will happen. Everybody knows Keith McBain ain't goin' to last for another year's contractin'. Nobody's goin' to take his place but the one that has a right to take it. That's me—all on account of our understandin'."

Cherry got to her feet, her arms rigid, her finger-nails biting into her palms.

"Keith McBain is still boss of this camp," she said, "and if you want to know it, his daughter, Cherry McBain, is still mistress of her own heart. It's time you knew that you can't frighten either of us."

She was fully aware of the hazardous game she was playing. So long as his conversation turned upon her alone she had been capable of keeping her impatience well under control. After all, he might tire of a game in which he was no match for a wary opponent. But when he mentioned her father's name she could stand it no longer. The blood of Old Silent was hot in her veins, and the fire that had flashed from his eyes was leaping now in her own. She recalled the numberless times when she had seen her father reduced to a pitiful meekness before a word from Bill McCartney. She had wept bitterly for the old man, broken in body and will by a man whose only title to recognition was brute force and the possession of a life secret. All the injustice of it came upon her like a flood. She would do no more weeping. She would cringe no more. She would fight, whatever the consequences, and bring her father to fight as well.

McCartney got up and looked at her with his customary sneer. "You talk that way because you don't know," he said slowly, "because he ain't here to stop you. But I ain't goin' to be foolish about it. When Keith McBain wants to fight Bill McCartney he's welcome. But he won't fight—because he can't fight. He's wanted bad an' he knows the right hunch to play. An' you ain't goin' to fight Bill McCartney neither, for Bill McCartney ain't goin' to fight you. He's goin' to love you!"

He left his place beside the chair and lurched unsteadily towards her. Leaving the couch quickly, Cherry moved till she got the table between herself and

McCartney and then looked at him steadily. For some reason her fear, her nervousness was gone. She felt equal to any emergency, and quite capable of matching any move he should make. She made up her mind that if she could reach the door she would make a dash for the outside and call Gabe. But McCartney, dazed though he was from drinking, was sufficiently alert to anticipate any such move on her part, and was careful to keep possession of the side of the table nearest the door. After a couple of futile attempts on McCartney's part to reach Cherry, he stood for a moment and looked at her, leaning forward with both hands on the table.

"There ain't a bit o' use in this—an' you know it!" he declared, and for the first time since he had entered the cabin his look was sinister and threatening. "Do you want me to go out o' here?"

"I do—get out!" Cherry replied.

"If I get out, Keith McBain 'll pay. He knows that, if you don't."

"You can't frighten me—and you can't frighten him. Get out, I tell you!"

"If you mean that—" he straightened up as he spoke, as if he were about to leave.

"Get out, I tell you!"

Suddenly his manner changed. A smile of contempt curled one corner of his mouth.

"You damn little fool!" he sneered.

Seizing the lamp quickly he placed it on the chair behind him, and with one movement of his powerful arms he swept the table to one side and lurched clumsily towards her. Realizing that she could not escape, Cherry set herself to meet his rush. As he put out his arms to seize her she closed her hand and swung with all the weight of her body at his face. The blow went straight and quick, so quick that McCartney recoiled a little in surprise, and paused a moment to look at her. One moment was enough for Cherry. Before he could clearly understand what had happened she had darted for the door. Her hand was on the latch before he came to himself, and in another second she would have been out and away. But McCartney's heavy hands clutched her shoulders as she was on the point of opening the door, and she felt herself lifted bodily from the floor.

Setting her upon her feet at a safe distance from the door he turned her round, and raising her face, looked at her with a smile.

"Ain't you the little fool! I thought you had sense."

He stopped suddenly and his hold upon Cherry relaxed.

There was a sound of footsteps on the pathway outside. Cherry listened with indrawn breath—the footsteps were familiar. When they stopped before the door she turned quickly.

"Gabe! Gabe!" she called.

The door opened quickly and old Gabe stood in the doorway and blinked wonderingly as he looked into the cabin.

"Put this man out, Gabe!" Cherry said, quickly, breaking away from McCartney, whose whole attention was now on the old man who had come to take a hand in an affair that he had thought peculiarly his own.

Gabe continued to blink uncertainly, and seemed to have difficulty in finding anything to say. But the next moment the old man showed a surprising quickness of movement. If he had not moved quickly McCartney would have been upon him. Stepping back suddenly through the open doorway into the darkness outside he avoided the kick that the big foreman aimed at him. But before McCartney could recover himself to close the door, Gabe had leaped back into the light again, only this time he was prepared to take the aggressive.

In his right hand he held Lush Currie's "remembrance," the light from the lamp glinting on the polished steel. Gabe's hand shook so perceptibly that, in spite of the critical situation all three were facing, Cherry had all she could do to keep from laughing. But if Gabe's hand shook, his eyes were steady and it was Gabe's eye that McCartney watched.

"Now, Bill," he said in a voice that expressed grim determination even if it was a little thin, "you git out—an' move damn quick!"

Cherry watched the men closely for a moment while McCartney stood as if rooted to the spot from sheer surprise at the old man's nerve. That moment was like an hour to Cherry. She did not think Gabe would actually carry out what he threatened if his commands were not obeyed to the last syllable, but there was a note in his voice that was new to her. It meant simply that Gabe Smith would stand for no trifling.

The next moment, however, brought relief. McCartney moved round towards the door and Gabe circled away from it very cautiously. By the time McCartney had reached the doorway Cherry was ready to laugh at the whole performance. When he turned sulkily and stepped quickly out, followed by Gabe, who waited a moment in the doorway before he came back into the cabin and closed the door again behind him, she did laugh.

Gabe stood and looked at her in silence and surprise until she was through laughing, and then sat down.

"Gabe, you dear old silly!" she said, going over to him. "You might have hit me—or even yourself if you had put that thing off!"

Gabe made no reply. He was too serious, too much occupied, perhaps, with the importance of the thing he had done and the things it would probably lead to in the very near future.

The new day had already begun to dawn when Gabe finally stole quietly out of the cabin and took his way down the path. He had left Cherry sleeping

soundly and was himself very weary after his night's vigil. But he knew a full day awaited him, and he was determined to face it with as much courage as his old heart could muster.

Countless times that night he had prayed inwardly for help from somewhere. Even now, as he plodded wearily from the cabin to the trail, he was muttering something to himself that might have passed for a petition to the Heavenly Powers.

And as if in answer to his prayerful mutterings, there came trudging heavily towards him round the bend in the trail just where it left the trees and entered the camp, a man leading a horse by the bridle rein and followed by a tired-looking dog.

"King, boy!" cried Gabe, and could say no more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

King's first enquiry was concerning Cherry. For reasons which were perhaps his own, Gabe made no reference to what had occurred in the cabin during the night, and after briefly assuring him that she was all right, hastened to ask King where he had been and how he had come to put in an appearance so unexpectedly.

King, in his turn, simply smiled at the old man's curiosity, and asked Gabe to get him something to eat at once. Gabe met the request by pointing to the pile of smoking ashes that now lay where the cook-camp had stood. King made no effort to conceal his surprise. As a result of Currie's warning of the night before, he was prepared to meet difficulty on arriving at the camp. He had not lived for the best part of his life in camps without knowing something of what a man of McCartney's type could do if he were given a free hand with a gang of men. He was prepared to find the men carousing and perhaps fighting among themselves. He expected to find the camp in a state of general excitement. But the heap of smouldering ashes was a concrete result that he scarcely expected.

He looked for a few moments at the smoke rising from the ashes and then turned to Gabe with a questioning look in his eyes. Gabe's reply was brief but effective.

"Bill McCartney," he said.

When King had questioned him fully and had learned all the details of the trouble that had culminated in the burning of the cook-camp, he went with Gabe

to the camp-store and awakened the timekeeper, who opened the door very warily at first, until he was satisfied that the early morning visitors had no design upon his person, nor any upon his stores either except what might be expected of two very hungry men.

And for the next two hours or more the two men held council seated upon a couple of packing boxes, and laid their plans for the day. Nor were the plans easy to make. There were many things to be done at once if the work that Bill McCartney had started was to be undone before it was too late. They went carefully over the names of the camp-followers, using the pass-book of the timekeeper for a guide, and divided the men roughly into two groups, one composed of those to whom they could appeal for assistance and the other of the men who had probably been won over to the side of McCartney. This task was not a difficult one, but it was not so easy to organize their dozen or so of picked men so that they could effectively do the work that would have to be done during the day.

In the first place Keith McBain must be brought from town. Both King and Gabe were firmly of the opinion that Keith's presence would at once bring the men to their senses. They believed, moreover, that McCartney would back down when called upon to face Old Silent. King determined that they should wait until the afternoon, with the hope that the old contractor might come back of his own accord. In case he did not put in an appearance, King decided that he should go himself to town while there was yet light enough to make travelling easy. The rain had stopped during the night, and although the sky was still heavy the clouds were showing signs of breaking.

In the event of King having to go finally for Keith McBain, the care of the camp was to be left in the hands of old Gabe and the few men they had picked to help him. King insisted upon special provision being made to the end that no harm should befall Cherry, and that the cabin among the tamaracs should be left unmolested.

By the time they had perfected their plans and were ready to go out to put them into effect, the sun was already well above the horizon, and when they stepped out of the narrow doorway it was under a sky in which ragged edges of clouds were torn apart and changed to silver where the long shafts had broken through. The day was dawning full of promise at any rate, and both men felt its influence strike them as they turned and walked down the trail.

As matters turned out, the day passed so quietly that both King and Gabe were surprised. During the morning scarcely anyone stirred in camp, most of the men making good their opportunity to sleep off the effects of the night before. Three times King strolled off in the direction of the cabin to watch for the first indication that Cherry was moving about. Not until it was noon, however, did he see the smoke rising from the pipe that served as a chimney and stuck out from

under the roof at one end of the cabin.

His first impulse was to go down and see Cherry at once. He wanted to talk to her about the affairs of the camp, and he hoped he might have an opportunity to explain the misunderstanding that existed between them. On second thought, however, he decided to get Gabe to go with him and to confine whatever conversation they might have to the business they had in hand.

Accordingly the two men went to the cabin together early in the afternoon to acquaint Cherry of the plans they had laid. She was standing outside among the tamaracs when they arrived. King noticed that her greeting, while courteous, was without any enthusiasm. They went into the house and sat down.

"We have some help, Cherry," Gabe said when they had seated themselves.

"So I see," she responded without concern.

Gabe, however, was probably unaware of any change in Cherry's manner. The change was meant for King and it was not lost upon him. He sat silently listening to Gabe and Cherry while they discussed plans.

Only once did Cherry show anything of her usual manner, and that was when Gabe mentioned the fact that King was about to start for town to get her father.

"I was just getting ready to do that myself," she protested.

"I think King had better go," Gabe insisted. "Of course, if you would like to go along—"

"Oh, no," she replied, "it isn't necessary. Besides you might need some more help here, Gabe."

She smiled at the recollection of what had occurred the night before.

"Yes—we might need you here," Gabe mused, as if he were talking to himself. "I was just thinkin' that things were so quiet now that perhaps I could get along alone."

"No, Gabe," said Cherry, "one will be enough to go for father. I'll stay in the camp."

A few minutes later when the two men were walking down the pathway towards the camp Gabe looked oddly at King.

"There's something gone the matter with that girl," he said. "She ain't like she always is."

"Perhaps it's—her father," King suggested, but Gabe made no immediate response to the suggestion.

"No, it ain't her father," he said after a few minutes. "She was as much worried over her father last night as she is to-day. There's something else."

King did not offer any further suggestions and the two walked along in silence for some little distance. At last Gabe stopped abruptly.

"Now I come to think of it," he said suddenly, "what the devil was wrong

with you? You ain't seen her for days and yet you sat there all that time without speakin' a word."

The smile that started to King's face vanished suddenly. "Gabe, there's little chance for us to understand a woman," he said slowly. "I never could—they were always strange to me."

"I ain't thinkin' just now about her ways," Gabe replied with a directness that he never achieved except when he was very excited or very much in earnest. "It's you—your way ain't what it always is."

"I guess you're right, Gabe," King replied. "There's been something—just a misunderstanding—that's all."

Gabe whistled to himself—a very long, low whistle.

Dinner was served in camp that day very much as usual, with the exception that tables had to be set in the bunk-house. The supply of dishes was not all that might have been desired, but the cook's ingenuity and the exigencies of the occasion in which there was at least a little humour, did much to make the dinner hour almost as pleasant as it had ever been. The supply of eatables was ample, with plenty still to spare in the store. And although nothing was said about it there was a tacit recognition, and it was pretty general too, that the men had King to thank for the fact that the first meal served since the burning of the cook-camp was ample and well-ordered, even if it did come two hours late.

It was the middle of the afternoon before King got away. With anything like good luck in travelling he hoped he might reach town before dusk and if the roads were in a condition that made his return possible that night he would be on his way back again by dawn the next day. He hoped that he might be able to return again that night.

His hopes were not encouraged, however, as he rode along. The trail was in bad shape and the rivers had not yet begun to go down. A wish he had entertained when he set out, that he might perhaps meet Keith McBain somewhere along the way, changed quickly to a fear lest the old man should have set out by himself and have met disaster on the way. For he knew that if the old contractor's homecoming on this occasion was anything like it had been on other occasions, there was only one chance in a thousand that he would get through.

There was still more than an hour of daylight left when he reached the White Pine River. The water had risen until now it was running over the bridge in the middle where the logs that had been thrown across for main supports sagged most. The bridge itself, however, was still intact. The embankments that had been thrown up at either end were still visible and appeared to offer good footing, although King knew that the submerged roadway leading away from the bridgehead on either side was washed away by the current. The only question that gave him any concern was whether or not the poles that did service for the

bridge planking were still in their places. So far as he could see not one of them had moved out of place. Altogether he felt sure that the crossing was worth trying at any rate. The distance was not great, and if the worst should happen he was confident of his ability to bring himself safely to shore somewhere down stream. The attempt to cross was not to be made recklessly, at any rate, and getting down from his horse King made as careful a survey of the conditions as he could on foot. When he had looked the place over thoroughly and considered the different emergencies that might arise and what he should do to meet each, he got back again into the saddle, and turning his horse towards the bridge-head urged him forward gently.

The horse stepped down very cautiously into the water, proceeded a few yards—and then stopped. The water was almost up to animal's flanks now and was rushing past in a dizzy whirl that made the horse tremble in every muscle and limb. The dog was still standing with two front paws in the water, whining and yelping. For a moment King waited to reconsider what he had planned. He felt almost like turning back and taking the affairs of the camp arbitrarily into his own hands until Keith McBain turned up of his own accord. But in that moment of hesitation something happened that decided the whole question for him at once.

Above the rushing of the water he heard the sound of wheels striking against stones, and looking up he saw Keith McBain's horses coming on the run towards him, the buckboard jumping along behind them and rocking from side to side in the trail—empty. When the team came to the opposite side of the stream, King shouted to them and they stopped suddenly, but not before they had plunged half way to the bridge-head and stood in the deepest part of the current on the other side of the bridge. For a moment only, they stood and looked at King and then wheeling about, and carried by the weight of the flood, plunged back again out of the water and into the poplars that stood at the side of the trail. There they were brought to a standstill in a tangle of branches and underbrush.

All thought of turning back was now impossible for King. Somewhere along the trail that lay ahead Keith McBain was probably lying injured at least, perhaps unconscious, possibly dead. A word to his horse and they plunged into the stream, at first quickly, then more carefully as the water became deeper. Once or twice when the footing became uncertain King got ready to dismount and hold to the horn of the saddle with one hand while the horse brought him to safety, but he realized that his own weight helped the horse to keep its feet. Then suddenly the ground seemed to give way under them, and he swung his leg over and slipped into the water. Just as he did so the horse gave a mad plunge forward and King had all he could do to keep his hold upon the saddle. But in that one leap the animal found fresh footing and the next moment was standing upon the

bridge-head with King beside him.

King looked back just in time to see Sal jump into the water and come paddling towards him. But the current was too much for the dog. In spite of King's whistling and calling to her by way of encouragement, she was carried downstream past the embankment and King watched her with grave doubts rising in his mind. Where the stream took a quick turn to the right King lost sight of the dog among partly submerged tree-trunks, but in a moment he heard her bark echoing through the woods and before long she was standing on the trail beside him, shaking herself and yelping at him.

The next stage of the crossing was no less uncertain, but King walked ahead and led his horse, trying every pole with his foot to see that it was secure before he went forward. At the middle of the bridge the water was almost to his knees and the force of the current was so great that King marvelled that the bridge held against it.

When he came at last to the end of the bridge he sent the horse in and walked along beside him with his hand on the horn of the saddle. The passage proved easier than before and presented no special difficulty.

Having shaken the water from his clothes, King left his horse standing in the trail and went to extricate Keith McBain's team from the woods. The task was not so difficult as he had anticipated, for although the horses were excited and nervous they seemed almost exhausted and allowed King to move about them without showing any ill temper. In less than fifteen minutes he had unhitched them and led them out upon the trail, where he tethered them securely in a sheltered place under cover of a clump of poplars. Then he brought the badly shaken buckboard out and left it standing beside the trail.

This done, he adjusted the girths of his own horse, and getting into the saddle went off at a gallop. There was still almost an hour of daylight left in which to find Keith McBain, bring him back, and recross the White Pine. The knowledge that he might have to go most of the way to town before he should find the old man, and the fact that Keith McBain was in all probability lying in a helpless condition with body battered and bones broken, made King urge his horse forward as fast as the slippery trail would allow.

Fortunately, however, he had not far to go. Mounting a little hill that he remembered quite well from having stood there in the evening to get a glimpse of the valley below with its little stream of water and its wild meadows, King thought he heard the sound of voices. When he got to the top of the hill and looked down, he was surprised to see the figure of a girl standing in the middle of the trail and waving to him. It was Anne.

In a moment he was beside her and was following her on foot to where Keith McBain was lying upon the ground.

"Is he hurt?" King asked at once as he looked at the old man.

"Not much—nothing serious, I think," Anne replied.

Keith McBain turned his head and looked at King at the sound of a new voice. He seemed on the point of speaking but simply shook his head a little, and then with a great deal of effort propped himself up on one elbow and regarded King very thoughtfully.

"It's me—King Howden—Mr. McBain," King said.

"I know—that's all right," was the reply. "Get me out of here—I've got to get back—I've got to get to the camp—and I've got to get back to my girl."

He dropped his eyes as if he were looking himself over. Then he looked at King again.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir—everything's all right," King replied; "only we must get you back."

"Everything?" the old man asked, coming suddenly to himself again, speaking in his sharp, direct way. "Who asked about everything? What the hell do I care about everything? I want to know about my girl."

"She's all right, Mr. McBain," King assured him again.

"That's right, eh? Howden, don't lie to me!"

King smiled and put his arm under the old man to raise him to a more comfortable position.

"Where's McCartney?" he asked as soon as King had made him comfortable.

"He's at the camp, sir," King said, and he guessed something of what was passing in Keith McBain's mind.

"Then get me out of here—I've got to get back there. I've been too long away—altogether too long. But something happened—the dirty crooks. Here—get me up."

King and Anne got him to his feet and helped him out to the trail, where he stood for a moment and looked about him.

"What's wrong here?" he asked when he had looked round at the roadway and the woods. "Where's my team? Didn't I leave them here a minute ago? Where are they? Anne, bring the team."

Anne looked at King. "He doesn't know what's happened to him," she said.

"I've got the team waiting for you down the trail a little," King replied. "You'll have to get up here and ride."

Without murmuring he allowed himself to be lifted into the saddle. King, with Anne walking beside him, helped him to keep his seat, and together the three went back the way King had just come.

Only twice did Keith McBain speak a word along the way. Once he addressed Anne. "You're a good girl, Anne," he said.

A little later he leaned and touched King's shoulder. "My boy," he said, nodding his head towards Anne, "she got me out of this."

And in the meantime Anne was recounting for King the circumstances that had led her to bring Keith McBain away from town.

"There's something crooked about it," she told King. "That scrub Rickard came to town the same day. He's been hangin' round ever since—keepin' Old Silent under his eye. But the old fellow seemed to catch on that he was not goin' to have his little time all alone, and he came to me last night and says, 'Anne, I want to go back in the morning. No matter what happens,' he said, 'no matter what I say about it, take me back, will you? Promise that!' I promised and he took my hand. Then he went out. Late last night Mike Cheney and Rickard brought him in and put him to bed. When I went to wake him this morning I couldn't get him to answer. I opened the door and he was lyin'—dead to the world. I didn't say anything to the house. I just worked him out of it myself and when he came back a little I went out and got the team. Old Hurley came and helped me till we got started away. Hurley didn't like the idea, but I told him what he'd told me the night before, and he didn't say anything against it. We slipped out without anyone knowin' about it and was gettin' on great until we come to high water back there under the hill where you found us. The team had been skittish all the way, but the high water put them up in the air, and I just couldn't hold 'em and look after the old man too. It might 'a' been all right at that, but we hit something in the road and he rolled out. I did everything I could, but the team was runnin' their fool heads off and I couldn't stop 'em. So I got over the seat and dropped off behind and let them go. Then I went back and found him lyin' beside the trail. I thought he was dead, for, honest to God, he looked it. But I rolled him over and got him lyin' out flat and was workin' over him when I heard you comin'. That's all there is to it."

It had already begun to grow dusk when they came to the White Pine crossing. Leaving Keith McBain in Anne's care for the time being, King busied himself with preparations for getting to the other side. Though he had been gone only a little more than an hour he was gratified to find that the water had receded considerably—as is the way with mountain streams where the source is only a few miles off—and the surface of the bridge was almost clear.

Quickly hitching the team to the buckboard, King gave the reins to Anne and told her to get up on the seat. Then, helping Keith McBain to dismount, he led him to a place where he could sit down and wait. Mounting his own horse, he took hold of a short tethering rope fastened to the bit of one of McBain's team, and led the way with emphatic warnings to the girl to hang on. The passage was not a difficult one for King, although it had now grown dusk. His horse managed to keep his feet in the current, though once or twice he seemed to have all he

could do. For Anne the crossing must have been almost nerve-shattering—but she never spoke a word until they were safely across. Then she got down from the seat and stepped up to where King was tethering the team. She looked at her dripping clothes and then at the stream rushing past in the thickening darkness.

"Are you goin' back there again?" she asked.

King grunted an affirmative.

"Go ahead—I'll do the prayin'," she replied.

A few minutes later King was beside Keith McBain, helping him into the saddle. When he got him up he bound him securely to the seat and tied his feet so that they could not come out of the stirrups. Then he sent the horse in and walked alongside, his hand on the saddle horn. The crossing was made without accident of any kind and in a few minutes they were ready for the road, Anne mounted in the saddle, and King seated in the buckboard with Keith McBain beside him. At a sharp whistle from King, Sal started from the bushes beside the trail and all set off together.

A couple of hours later, as they drove through the camp on the way to Keith McBain's cabin, King noticed two dark figures on horseback riding into camp from the opposite direction. As they passed him he looked them over very carefully. Though it was too dark to see clearly who the men were, King's mind naturally reverted to the two riders he had seen in the hills early in the morning of the day before.

And right there he decided that Anne had been sent by heaven in a time of need. He would send her back next day with full instructions to old man Hurley to register the claim in the hills—if necessary under Anne's signature.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Five minutes later King and Anne stood before the door of the cabin, one on each side of Keith McBain. The door was closed, but there was a light within and the sound of someone talking. King was about to knock when the old man put his hand out abruptly and pressing the latch pushed the door open.

"Cherry, girl!" he called.

In a moment Cherry was facing them, with her hands out to her father, the form of old Gabe Smith crowding into the doorway beside her. Gabe apparently did not see that Keith McBain was not alone, and expressed his eagerness to assist

his old boss.

"Wait, sir," he said, moving Cherry to one side as he came forward, "I'll give you a hand."

"Get out of the way," commanded Keith McBain in a voice that was very much like his own. "I don't need your help."

Gabe had seen King and Anne and had already stepped back into the cabin with Cherry. The old contractor lifted his chest, steadied himself a little, and then shook his shoulders impatiently to be rid of the support that Anne and King were giving him. Then he stepped resolutely up and entered the doorway. For a moment he hesitated and looked straight before him into the room, and then walked deliberately towards the couch. King and Anne stood just inside the doorway and watched him as he made his way uncertainly across the floor. Cherry was beside him all the way, offering to help him, but he gave her not the slightest heed. When at last he reached the couch he turned and was in the act of seating himself when his legs seemed to give way under him and he collapsed in a heap. They lifted him quietly and laid him on the couch. For a long time he was silent and no one in the room spoke. Finally he looked about him until his eyes fell upon his daughter, and he held out his hand to her.

"A little water, girl," he said, quite clearly, and when she put the cup to his lips he gulped a mouthful nervously and then pushed it away. "There—that'll do, my girl—let me lie down for a little."

He relaxed completely when they had set him back, and in a few moments went off in a sound sleep. Scarcely a word had been spoken by any member of the group, but as soon as they realized that the old man had fallen asleep Gabe and King withdrew quietly, leaving Anne with Cherry.

As soon as King had heard Gabe's report on what had occurred during his absence he outlined in brief form what he believed to be McCartney's plan to register a timber claim in the hills and set up a camp for the winter. For the first time he felt it was necessary to reveal to Gabe the secrets that lay behind McCartney's power and the objectives which he knew McCartney was aiming to achieve. The old man listened intently and surprise grew in his face as he heard what King had to relate. The circumstances made it very clear to Gabe that King must stay in camp for a couple of days at any rate, or until such time as Keith McBain could resume control of affairs. That Anne should be sent back early in the morning with instructions to Hurley seemed at once the most feasible, and the most easily executed plan they could adopt. Accordingly, after turning the horses over to the care of the corral foreman, they went at once to the store where they knew they would probably be alone, where King, with the help of roughly-sketched maps and memoranda he had made during his trip in the hills, drew up detailed information which Anne should place in the hands of Hurley.

When the information was complete and all the instructions carefully worked out, King took Gabe with him to make the rounds of the camp before laying plans for the night. The strenuous life of the past week, with its days and many of its nights crowded with activity, was beginning to tell on King, and he was hoping that he might be able to steal a few hours' rest before anything further cropped up to claim his attention.

The camp was in darkness. A solitary light shone from the window of the large bunkhouse where the men had eaten their meals during the day. King, with Gabe following closely behind him, went first to the corral to see that the horses had not been neglected. They found the foreman sitting on a bale of pressed hay, smoking quietly by himself. He had attended personally to the comfort of King's horse and Keith McBain's team, and seemed pleased when King looked his approval.

"They don't look bad at all," King remarked, running his hand over the flank of one of McBain's team.

"Huh—they're all right," the foreman replied. "They don't do enough to hurt them. No—but here's a couple that looks about all in."

He led King and Gabe to two horses that stood together munching lazily at the wisp of dry hay that the foreman had placed before them.

"Them horses are too tired to eat," he said, as he went between them and stroked their coats still matted with rain and sweat.

King looked the horses over in silence. He did not have to be told the reason for their condition. When Gabe turned to him with questioning look, King nodded. After they had gone the rounds of the corral and had found everything in good order they left and went out again to learn, if possible, what mood the men were in.

They had not gone more than a dozen steps when the door of the large bunkhouse opened and a flood of light fell from the open doorway upon the wet ground immediately in front. Someone appeared in the doorway for a moment and threw a bottle that fell against a pile of stones a few yards away. At the sound of the breaking glass old Gabe grunted.

"They're at it again to-night," he said with grim emphasis.

"I guess we'll have to go in and look round anyhow," King replied quietly.

As he spoke the sound of laughter came from the bunkhouse, and the voices of two or three men speaking very loudly.

King and Gabe paused when they came to the door and listened for a moment to what was going on within. There was the usual round of noisy conversation without the slightest indication of dissension of any kind, and King was of two minds whether he should go in at all, or turn back and go to the store, at the back of which he had a cot prepared for a night's rest. While he hesitated,

however, Gabe stepped forward and opened the door, and the next moment King followed him into the bunkhouse.

Their coming created no surprise. They were greeted casually and with no show of concern. At the end of the open space that ran the length of the bunkhouse from the door to the other end, one of the camp hands, a mere boy, was just beginning a song for the entertainment of the men, who were lounging about on benches and in the bunks, some of them already half asleep.

King and Gabe sat down on the edge of one of the bunks and listened to the high falsetto that piped through the whole length of twelve or fifteen verses that reeked with tragedy. During the song King looked about him quietly at the men. In the faces of most of them he could trace the effects of two or three days' debauch. But they all seemed quiet and gave no indication of bad temper. In fact when the boy came to the last line of his song and spoke the words in the time-honored manner that camp singers have of ending a song, the applause that broke from the men was so generous and their comments so good-natured that King could not help feeling his sense of security returning. He was confident that he had nothing to fear from these men if they were left alone. With the exception of three or four, who looked as if they had been drinking a little too freely during the evening, the men had sobered up and were almost normal again.

King got up and walked the full length of the open space between the bunks and sat down on a bench near a group of men who were playing cards. He spoke to no one except to return the greetings he received here and there as he passed among the men, and when he had sat down he rolled himself a cigarette and watched the game in silence. Gabe was still sitting near the door talking to some of the men.

Gradually, as King sat watching the game, he became conscious of a change in the atmosphere of general good nature that had pervaded the bunkhouse. The conversation grew noisy and he thought he heard his own name mentioned once or twice in a hoarse whisper. He did not even turn his head, however, until he felt someone's hand on his shoulder and looked round to see Gabe leaning over him. The old fellow indicated by a shake of his head that he was ready to go, and King got up to follow him.

Immediately there was a disturbance behind him, and he turned to see three of the men struggling with a fourth. When they had succeeded in pushing him back into his bunk one of them turned to King with a laugh.

"Your life ain't worth mor'n a bob-tailed flush round here, Howden," he said, "an' I'm givin' you odds at that."

King looked at the man in the bunk. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Don't you bother about him, Howden," said another, "he's drunk, an' he don't like you, but—"

"He just got in from the road," interrupted the first speaker, "an' he ain't had much to eat. A couple o' drinks was enough to put him out."

For a moment the hum of conversation ceased and the men looked out from their bunks with expectancy in their faces. And in that moment the door opened and Bill McCartney stepped in.

King looked at him from the other end of the long aisle. For some time McCartney apparently didn't see him. Suddenly their eyes met and King noticed that McCartney swayed unsteadily, and putting out his hand laid it upon the edge of a bunk for support.

Someone standing close to King muttered in a half whisper:

"Look out, Howden, he's drunk, an' he's ugly, an' he's goin' to get you if he can."

But King continued looking at McCartney without speaking a word. Gabe tugged a moment at King's arm, but King moved him gently to one side. His whole attention was centred on McCartney, who had taken his hand from the bunk and was doing his best to stand erect and return King's gaze. Once he took a couple of steps towards King, but his knees wobbled and he was forced to put a hand out again to keep himself from falling. Then he looked at King with a sneer on his lips.

"What the hell—are you doin'—here?" he asked, in a voice that was thick and unsteady.

King did not reply.

"It won't do you no good—comin' round here—interferin' between Keith McBain an' me," McCartney went on. "That's my affair an' you keep out."

Still King did not offer to say a word.

But someone else spoke up from behind King.

"Go on back to your bunk, Bill," said the voice. "You're too drunk to talk that way to-night."

"Drunk?" sneered Bill McCartney, and for a moment he seemed suddenly to sober up. "Well, I'll tell you this. I may be drunk but I know what brings this son of a dog here where he ain't wanted—an' he knows. He's payin' a visit—a reg'lar visit."

King's frame straightened up and his jaw set firmly.

"But he's welcome, he can have her," McCartney continued. "He can ask her who was with her last night—ask Gabe there."

King took a half dozen steps towards McCartney and thrust his face close. Conversation had ceased and a deathly silence had come over the place. Every man there had looked forward to the time when these two should meet and settle accounts. The fact that McCartney was clearly under the influence of liquor gave some cause for regret but, on the other hand, they felt that if McCartney was

going to play the game at all it was strictly his own affair, and it was his business to come prepared for a show-down whenever and wherever the occasion arose.

"You don't give me a chance," King said very slowly and in a tone of genuine regret. "You talk to me like that because you're drunk. But you won't talk like that where I am, even if you are drunk. Some day you'll be sober, and I'm going to ask you about this. Then you'll have to eat what you said. But I'm going to wait. Just now I'm going to throw you out."

Even as he spoke, he stepped deliberately towards McCartney, and the latter lurched heavily to meet him, aiming a blow with his huge fist as he came. The blow was badly directed and King parried it without effort. The next moment he had McCartney round the waist and had lifted him bodily from the floor.

"Open the door, Gabe," he ordered, and as Gabe swung the door open King half carried, half pushed his struggling burden into the open doorway and with a final effort, into which he put all his strength, he lifted the drunken foreman and threw him out into the darkness, where he stumbled and fell clumsily to the ground.

King stood for a moment and watched him while he scrambled awkwardly to his feet and stood cursing. He would have come back at King almost immediately had it not been for a couple of the men who edged their way out quickly past King and led McCartney away in the darkness to his own quarters, cursing and shouting threats as he went.

Then King turned and looked behind him at the men.

"I guess we'll be going on back, Gabe," he said quietly. "There won't be any more trouble to-night."

Together the two men left the bunkhouse and started off down the trail towards the store.

When they had reached the door King stopped and looked once round the camp, where it lay in pitch darkness.

"Go on in, Gabe," he said to the old man. "I'm going to take a walk over to the cabin and see that everything is all right."

Gabe hesitated at the thought of letting King go away alone, but knowing his protests would be quite useless, he entered the store and King went off.

At first King found it difficult to make up his mind to go directly to the cabin. In his heart of hearts he yearned for one look at Cherry. But he knew Cherry's disposition. He knew that she had resolved upon a course of action in her future relations with him that he might just as well save himself the trouble of trying to change. And yet he wanted to hear her voice again; he wanted to speak to her and explain. He wondered if Anne might not have already said something that would make it easy for him to attempt to restore himself to Cherry's confidence.

And so, as he strolled along in the darkness, his mind was divided as to what he should do. By the time he had come to within a dozen yards of the cabin he had decided to allow his course of action to grow out of the dictates of the moment. One step at a time, he thought to himself, and started off again towards the cabin.

The light still shone from the cabin window, and the thought came to King that he might creep up and perhaps get a glimpse of Cherry through the window. But before he had covered half the distance he became instinctively aware of the presence of someone behind him. At first he had only a vague presentiment such as comes often to one moving about alone at night. But soon the feeling took complete possession of him, and he turned to see if he might not catch sight of someone following him. His first thought naturally was of McCartney, but he realized on second thought that McCartney was at that moment in no condition to justify the suspicion.

As a precautionary measure he walked back slowly along the pathway. He had gone not more than a dozen yards, however, when he stopped suddenly where the pathway was obscured by a clump of bushes that hung over from one side. Directly in front of him a form was moving towards him out of the darkness. When it had come within three yards of him it stopped and King thought he recognized the newcomer as one of the two riders whom he had met coming into camp earlier in the evening.

There was a quick movement that King could scarcely discern in the darkness, and he threw up his arms instinctively to ward off an attack. He was too late, however. Something struck him heavily upon the head and for a few moments he swayed dizzily with his hands upon his face, his teeth clenched in a struggle to beat back by sheer will-power a flood of horrible darkness that threatened to engulf his senses. For one brief moment he thought how utterly ridiculous it was that his legs should tremble so uncertainly under him, and that the world about him should seem to be moving in a dizzy circle. Then suddenly the realization came to him that he was in danger of losing the fight, and he redoubled his efforts to shake himself free from a power that clutched him like some black monster battling for his overthrow. He was vaguely conscious of something warm creeping down his cheek—like a great bead of sweat. He put his hand slowly to his head and ran his fingers through his hair. The sensation turned him sick.

In one last remaining moment of consciousness he realized that the struggle was going against him, and he summoned all the energy and power of will that was left him in an effort to reach the cabin before giving up. The noises in his ears became suddenly more deafening—he found it impossible to place his feet where they should go—his knees became sickeningly weak—then he stumbled over nothing and put his hands out blindly before him as he fell.

In a moment it was as if all the darkness that brooded over the world had crowded into one brain and blotted out the last ray of light.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

King awoke and looked round him. There had been a sound of a door closing somewhere and voices coming to him across a great distance. He remembered the passing of a cool breeze across his cheek with the fresh scent of wet pine in it.

Raising himself on his elbow he turned his head and took a quick survey of the room in which he was lying. Across the room the door was partly ajar—above him the window was wide open, letting in a flood of morning light. He tried to remember what had occurred—his head was very heavy and his temples throbbed with pain—he became dizzy, and the arm with which he supported himself became suddenly weak. He lay back again heavily upon the cot. For a moment he lay with his eyes closed, struggling to beat off the sense of utter forgetfulness that crept into his brain.

Something touched his elbow and he turned his head slightly on the pillow and opened his eyes again. Sal was there, her two front paws upon the patch-quilt that covered him, her eyes shining and her ears pricked forward in eager concern. King lifted a hand wearily and placed it upon the dog's paws, in response to which Sal emitted an anxious whine that ended in something like a bark.

Immediately the door was pushed wide open, and Gabe Smith stepped into the room. He was in his shirt-sleeves, but his hat was on his head and his pipe in his hand, ready, apparently, for action of whatever kind the occasion might prompt.

He moved over to the side of the cot and looked down at King with an odd smile, half of pity and half of amusement, lighting his old face.

"Tryin' to kick off?" he asked in an attempt to appear cheerful, "or are you jist tryin' to scare the rest of us to death?"

King's smile was too faint to be very assuring, and Gabe leaned down and looked more closely into his face.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

For reply King put one of his hands to his head and sighed heavily. He seemed to be on the point of speaking, but finding the effort too great turned his

head away impatiently and relaxed wearily against the pillows.

Without speaking another word Gabe left the room and returned in a few moments with Cherry. He remained standing by the door while the girl stepped over to the cot and laid her hand gently on King's forehead. At the touch of her hand he turned his head slowly again towards them and opened his eyes. He looked bewildered.

"You're here with us in the cabin," Cherry said, quietly. Then she got up quickly and left the room. When she came back she carried a jug of fresh water from the spring, and a white cup. Filling the cup quickly, she placed one hand under King's head and put the water to his lips.

He drank till the cup was quite empty and then lay back again upon the pillows and closed his eyes. Cherry looked at him with a strange fear gripping her heart. His face was pale and drawn, with a bright red spot flaming on each cheek. His brow was hot when she laid her hand on it, and his arms lying powerless upon the bed-cover were burning to the touch. She did not know whether he was asleep or not—he lay so still.

Getting up, she poured some water she had just taken from the spring into a dish that stood on a small table in one corner of the room. She dipped a clean bit of white cloth in the water and wrung it dry. Then she stepped again to the side of the cot, and brushing the hair back gently from King's forehead, laid the cold cloth on his brow.

For a moment she stood with her hand lying lightly upon the cloth and looking into King's face. Gabe came closer and stood looking down at them, extending one of his hands towards Sal, who was moving restlessly about and pawing at Gabe's knees to get his attention.

Slowly King opened his eyes. He looked at them a moment in silence.

"Would you like some more water?" Cherry asked him.

He nodded his head slightly and Gabe filled the cup and handed it to Cherry. This time he drank more slowly and was satisfied when he had taken but half of what was in the cup.

"I guess I'm—I'm worrying you," he said, and his voice was scarcely more than a hoarse whisper. "Sorry—but I'll be all right—soon. It's my head—I must have been hit—hit hard. I remember—I tried not to go down—but I—I had to go."

Cherry brushed her hand lightly across his hair.

"But you mustn't talk, King," she said quietly. "You must be quiet for a while."

He smiled up at her.

"Don't bother about me," he said. "I'll be better—right away."

His whole body seemed to relax suddenly as he ceased speaking, and he closed his eyes again. Cherry remained crouching upon one knee beside the

cot, her eyes upon his face, one of her hands still under his head, where she had placed it when she helped him to drink, the other hand on the coverlet, her fingers touching his arm.

Half consciously she allowed her hand to creep down until her fingers were pressing lightly against the pulse in his wrist. It was very fast, but quite strong. Even after she had ceased to observe the pulse-beat she allowed her fingers to remain half circling his stout wrist. Then she moved her hand over his and caught his fingers in her own. She glanced behind her—old Gabe had gone out of the room. For one long moment she allowed her hand to rest upon his, and then her fingers tightened slowly and her head bowed towards him.

His lips moved, and Cherry listened breathlessly for any word he might speak.

"I'll go back—stay here—Anne," he muttered. "Here you—Sal—come here. Steady up—you fool."

His voice trailed off into incoherent mutterings. Then he lay still and his breathing became even, though Cherry, in spite of her inexperience, knew that it was very quick and weak.

Once more she removed the cloth from his head, and washing it in cold water, replaced it again and pressed it down softly with her fingers.

Then she went out to where old Gabe Smith was standing in the doorway of the cabin. For a long time they stood together in silence, their eyes turned towards the trail where it came out of cover of the shrubbery and entered the camp.

"There's no use looking for her yet," said Cherry.

"No, she'll do well if she gets here much before supper," Gabe replied.

Cherry and Gabe were thinking of the same thing—they had been thinking of it for hours. Not long after King had stumbled and fallen unconscious in the darkness near Keith McBain's cabin, Gabe had started out to learn, if possible, what was delaying his return. When he came to the cabin and found that King had not been there, a hurried search was made, in which both Anne and Cherry assisted, and in a very short time they came across King's form lying a few feet from the beaten pathway, all but hidden among the grass and low brush into which he had fallen.

At first they had feared the very worst. He seemed to show no signs of life whatever. They got him into the cabin as quickly as possible, however, and Cherry's cot was made ready to receive him. When they had laid him down and bathed his head and face with cool water, old Gabe placed his hand close upon King's breast, while the two girls waited, fear and hope struggling for mastery in their hearts. At last Gabe drew a deep breath and nodded in the affirmative.

At once both girls hurried to perform a dozen small tasks, while Gabe re-

moved King's outer clothing and got him into bed. Then for an hour or more Cherry and Anne, with a gentleness that was native to them and went a long way towards supplying what they wanted in the way of experience, carefully washed the clots of blood from his hair and cleaned the wound that gaped viciously within a few inches of his left temple. When they had bathed the wound thoroughly and dressed it to the best of their ability, they were relieved to find him breathing quite audibly. His pulse was easily perceptible, and once or twice he had sighed deeply, like one coming out of a long sleep.

King's condition did not cease to cause them anxiety, however, and all three admitted their own helplessness in the face of serious developments.

It was Anne who spoke the first words that gave shape to their wondering. "We've got to get the company doctor," she said. "I'm goin' to the end-of-the-line. You can stay here and look after things."

She asked no help in preparing for the trip. A little after midnight she was off alone on Cherry's horse on a trail more than half hidden in darkness, a trail, moreover, that she had never travelled before. After all, she told herself, there was only one trail and it ended at the supply camp.

The hours of waiting that followed passed very slowly. Cherry had given her father all the attention he required and had left him sleeping soundly, with the hope that the morning would find him ready, as usual, to get up and go about the regular duties of the camp. During the hours that were left between Anne's departure and daybreak Cherry watched by King's side, placing cold cloths upon his fevered brow and bathing his wrists and arms in cold water from the spring. Gabe had stayed with her, dozing for a couple of hours on the couch, where he was ready to answer her call in case she wanted his assistance.

When the sun was well up Keith McBain had got up from his bed much as he had done every morning for years. After eating his breakfast and looking in for a brief moment upon King, he had left the cabin without a word to anyone, except Gabe Smith, whom he told to stay by Cherry during the day and see that she got some rest. During the early hours of the morning he had not once come back to the cabin, nor sent anyone to make inquiries. As many men as could be used on the grade in work that could be done in spite of the wet ground, were sent out under a foreman to go about their tasks in the usual manner. He himself had remained behind, with a score of men and a couple of teams, to repair the damage that had been done the night before. Though there would be at most only a few weeks during which there could be any use for a cook camp, Keith McBain went about the work of putting up a new camp with the same cool determination and matter-of-fact oversight that he would have given to the building of a camp that was to last for the whole summer. Before he had been on the ground an hour the men were swinging along at their work as evenly and as regularly as the parts of

a machine.

McCartney failed to put in an appearance at all during the day—but Old Silent never made the slightest reference to the fact.

As it turned out, it was already quite dark by the time Anne returned, seated in a buckboard, with the company doctor. The horse that she had ridden away on trotted along behind them, where they had tethered it to the rear axle.

Keith McBain met them at the door and greeted the doctor with a handshake and a smile that seemed for the moment to transform his stern grey face, lighting it up with a rare sympathy and a kindness that seldom found expression in his work-a-day life.

"The roads must be bad," he remarked, after they had exchanged greetings, and then, when the doctor had removed his coat and looked questioningly at him, "He's in there. The girl's with him."

The doctor, a young, energetic chap, whose manner was efficiency itself, went at once into the room that Keith McBain had indicated. No sooner was he gone than Anne stepped quickly to the old man and took him eagerly by the arm.

"How is he?" she said.

Keith McBain shook his head doubtfully.

"He may be some better," he replied. "He has slept all day, except now and then when he asked for a drink. He talks all right when he's awake, but——"

Cherry came out of the room and closed the door after her. Her face showed clearly the effects of what she had been through in the last few days, but no one could see the slightest indication that she was ready to give up. The light in her dark eyes shone stronger and more steady than ever. She had entered a conflict of which, for the time being at least, she felt herself the centre. The little world she had built for herself, and in which she had lived so long without giving more than a passing thought to the evil forces that were moving about her, was now in a state of chaos and disorder. She could no longer say to herself, as she had done so often before, that time would show the way. She knew enough of McCartney's designs (he had revealed enough to her himself) to know that unless something was done at once a very short time would bring disaster upon her father—of what nature and by what means she had ceased trying to imagine—and she knew not what misfortune upon herself.

And this conflict was supplemented by another, no less keen, that was being fought with her own heart as a battleground. In the room she had just left lay the man in whom, for the first time in her life, and for reasons she could not understand, she had imposed her fullest confidence in the face of impending disaster. But he was more than a protector. She had realized more keenly than ever, while she watched beside his cot, that a heart-hunger had seized her that only this big boy of a man could satisfy. She prayed for his recovery, for his own sake

and for her father's sake—but passionately for the sake of the woman that she was.

And now as she stood by the door she had just closed and looked at Anne, who was talking to her father, she felt as one who has awakened from a happy dream. In her pride she could not think of showing any but the most casual regard for Anne; but in her riotous young heart she almost hated her. Even as these thoughts flashed across her mind she saw her father place an arm about Anne's shoulders.

"Anne," he said quietly, "you've done your part, girl. But you've got to get some rest now. Cherry—make her go to bed as soon as she has had a bite to eat."

For the next hour there were few words spoken. Keith McBain sat by himself apart and smoked incessantly. Occasionally the doctor opened the door of the room in which he was working and asked for something to be brought him. But the request was made without any exchange of words beyond what was absolutely essential. Even when Gabe Smith entered after seeing that the horses had received the attention they required, there was little more than a questioning look or two and an exchange of glances.

When after a long time the doctor finally came out of the room the expression on his face was so reassuring as to change the mood of every one of them instantly. Keith McBain was the first to speak. He got up quickly, taking his pipe from his mouth as he stepped briskly towards the doctor.

"Well," he said, "what's the verdict?"

The doctor smiled.

"If the same thing had happened to me, Mr. McBain," the doctor replied, "my light would have gone out for good. But this boy, Howden—he'll be out again for the mail in a week, if he gets anything like careful handling in the meantime. There are some men in the world that you can't kill—and he seems to be one of them. But give me something to eat. I can talk better on a full stomach."

The conversation turned into another channel and finally followed a course that was of interest only to the men.

The doctor did not stay long after he had eaten his supper, but he gave his directions very specifically to Cherry. The patient had to be kept where he was for a few days, and Cherry herself would have to give him all the attention possible. He was not to talk nor become excited. The dressings were explained thoroughly, and all the details of the treatment he was to receive were gone into briefly but pointedly. And then—the doctor was gone, and they were alone again.

The next morning Anne left for town. For reasons which Cherry could not explain she had been strangely drawn to the girl during the two nights they had spent together in the cabin. Fears and hopes that are shared in common are powerful factors in shaping human lives and moulding human sympathies. And

Cherry had actually come to look upon Anne with something like pity.

It was this feeling that prompted her to ride a little distance with her—this and her father's suggestion that she should go along to keep the girl company as well as to get into the air a little herself.

Their conversation had never turned to King Howden, except when they had referred to his condition. It was all the more surprising to Cherry, then, when, after a long silence during which they had been riding slowly and lost in their own thoughts, Anne spoke very quietly and with some feeling concerning King.

"I'm goin' back to town because there's nothin' else to it for me," she said. "If I had my own way—I'd stay by that boy till he was ready to come back."

Cherry was startled at the girl's words and her face expressed something of what she felt. Anne glanced at her and hastened to continue.

"Oh, don't get me wrong on that," she said apologetically. "I know you'll do what's right—do it better than I could."

"I don't misunderstand you," Cherry replied, and to herself she wished Anne's words could have meant something different from the meaning she had taken from them.

"He's right," Anne continued, without more than a glance to satisfy Cherry; "he's right—an' that's sayin' something. I'm older than you—though twenty-five ought to be young enough for anyone—but I've seen a few men—an' a mighty lot of what passes for men—an' I'll tell you this, when you find a man that's on the level you can't help wantin' to keep him round. But—Lord, Anne's gettin' sentimental."

She broke off suddenly and gave her rein a shake, and the next moment was off along the trail with Cherry following at an easy, loping gait behind her.

They rode thus in silence until they came to the bridge over the White Pine. The water had gone down almost as suddenly as it had risen, and the crossing presented no difficulty whatever. Cherry waited till Anne had got safely over to the other side, and then, after an exchange of farewells, turned back towards the camp.

Cherry's mind was busy every moment of the ride home that morning. Anne was a strange girl, behind whose jaunty manner, she felt sure, were hidden heart-breaks and disappointments that the outside world knew nothing of. Cherry had talked with her only a very little, had never really come to know her at all, in fact—and had never thought of her as anything more than just Anne, the girl in MacMurray's lodging-house. And yet, in her presence, Cherry felt a subtle power—the power that comes from long and hard experience, that made it difficult even to talk much.

But always, as Cherry thought about her, there arose in the background

an image of King Howden standing in the open doorway of the lodging-house with his arm about the girl, all but hidden in the gathering dusk. And somehow she could not resist the thought that Anne's words fully confirmed what she had first feared that evening when she rode so unexpectedly to MacMurray's door. The single hope to which she had clung in moments of depression, when disaster seemed about to break upon her world, was fast slipping away from her and she was being left to fight the battle alone.

And yet—

Late that afternoon Cherry took King's clothes from his room with the intention of hanging them outside for an hour before laying them away until he should be able to wear them again. It was a small service and an insignificant one, and yet she lingered over the task affectionately, shaking the dust from them and spreading them out flat upon the table, to smooth away the wrinkles. Gabe Smith, grown garrulous again because of renewed hopes of King's early recovery, was watching the process from beside the doorway.

"Don't you think you're some tender with that coat?" he asked. "Shake it well—there's a sight o' dust in that old jacket!"

For reply she threw the coat towards him.

"Here, Gabe," she remarked dryly, "why sit there and watch me do the dirty work?"

As he put out his hands to receive the coat something fell from one of the pockets. Cherry stooped to pick it up and then held it towards Gabe. It was a small bundle of folded papers. Gabe took it, and at the first glance his old face almost went white.

"My God!" he whispered hoarsely.

"Why, Gabe, what's wrong?" Cherry asked.

"I forgot," he said, looking at the papers in his hand. "It's the location—the timber claim. And McCartney—McCartney's been away from camp since—I don't know. We're beat."

And even as Gabe Smith spoke those words Hugh Hurley was sitting in his office in The Town, looking through his little window to where the valley lay smiling under the late afternoon sun. He was troubled in spirit—more troubled than he had been for a long time. Less than an hour had elapsed since an unwelcome visitor had come to town. But already the visitor's name was scrawled in the big registry book where claims were officially recorded. The claim was an extensive one in the hills that rose to the south of The Town, some ten or fifteen miles away—and the name on the record was the name of Bill McCartney.

Besides Hugh Hurley there was but one other person in that sleepy little

town, more sleepy and settled, it seemed, than ever—whose spirit was not all calm. McCartney had stepped out of Cheney’s place and was standing in the street by himself, rolling a cigarette in a leisurely manner that was contentment itself. He lifted his eyes for a moment and caught sight of Anne coming towards him. What was almost a frown passed quickly across his face, but was immediately replaced by a look of amusement, feigned or genuine it would have been impossible to say, and he continued to roll his cigarette without the slightest indication that he knew of the girl’s approach.

Anne came up to him without as much as a moment’s pause and stood directly in front of him.

“What are you doin’ in town?” she asked.

McCartney grunted and ran the tip of his tongue along the edge of the cigarette paper.

“Conductin’ a revival meetin’, Anne,” he said, folding the paper into place. “Why?”

“Wherever you are there’s somethin’ dirty gettin’ under way, if it ain’t already done—that’s why,” Anne replied.

McCartney’s face still grinned, but his heart was not in the smile with which he turned to her.

“Anne,” he said, “you’re a female—consequence is you can say what you please. It ain’t nice to say it, but I wish you was a man.”

“Lord!” Anne replied, “ain’t I wished the same thing about three million times in two years. An’ the wishes are all crowdin’ each other right now, Bill.”

She walked away and McCartney struck a match and touched it to his cigarette without speaking a word.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gabe Smith’s one concern after he had discovered his oversight, was to do everything in his power to minimize the consequences. He went at once in search of Keith McBain. The old contractor was out on the grade looking over the ground in the hope that operations might be got under way again first thing in the morning.

Gabe lost no time in unburdening his mind. He gave the packet at once to Keith McBain and then, as briefly and as pointedly as possible, explained to him

what King had feared when he made the papers out, and what his plan had been in case anything of an unexpected nature should occur.

Keith McBain took the papers, and opening them, looked through them slowly and quietly, while Gabe told his story. Had Gabe not been accustomed to the ways of his old boss he might have felt crestfallen at the apparent lack of effect which his spirited exposition produced in Old Silent. It is doubtful whether in Gabe's whole life he had ever been so excited—his piping voice was thinner and higher than ever. But when he had finished, Keith McBain failed to respond by so much as a single word. For some minutes he continued to look at the roughly-drawn maps that King had made. He seemed to be reading the specifications over and over again to himself. But Gabe, for all that he was excited, had not failed to catch the look of concern that grew in Keith McBain's face as he lingered over the papers.

When the old contractor spoke at last his face was more serious than it had ever been before, so far as Gabe Smith's memory served him, and his words came only with difficulty.

"You can leave these with me, Gabe," he said, folding the papers again very slowly and allowing his eyes to wander off along the narrowing perspective of the right-of-way as he spoke.

Keith McBain's mind had turned towards things that were beyond Gabe Smith's ken, and conversation was at an end.

Gabe turned and took his way alone back to the camp, but as he was leaving the right-of-way he looked behind him to see what had become of his old boss. He was far up the right-of-way, picking his way carefully along, his hands clasped behind his back, never casting a look behind him.

It was very late that evening when Keith McBain returned to the cabin and sat down to the supper that Cherry had prepared for him. And as he ate he was very silent. At last, when he had finished eating, he spoke, and his voice was very low and quiet.

"Cherry, my girl," he said, "come over here."

Cherry left the couch where she had been sitting and hurried to her father, ready to serve him, as she thought, with something she had forgotten to place on the table. Her face expressed what was in her mind.

"No—there's nothing I want, girl," he said, with a little wave of his hand. "Just stand beside me here."

Cherry came close to his chair and laid her hand across her father's shoulders. He put his arm about her and drew her close to him, where he held her for a moment without speaking. Then he raised his face to her and Cherry saw that his eyes were shining in the light from the lamp—there were tears in them.

"What is it, father?" she asked, and placed a hand very tenderly on his

forehead.

For answer he drew her down until she was on her knees beside his chair, and then with one arm about her shoulders and one hand upon her cheek he looked into her face.

"Cherry, girl," he said in a whisper that had a touch of great tenderness in it, "you had a good mother."

"Yes," she replied, and tried to smile at him.

"Your father—" he began, and then stopped.

"Yes?"

He bent low above her and kissed her hair. "Your father loves you, girl," he spoke at last, with tears in his voice as he spoke.

"Not more than I love him," Cherry replied, with a brave effort to make her voice cheerful.

"That's it, girl," he replied. "And we're going to stand—together?"

Never before had he spoken thus from his heart to her. Cherry tried to speak, but her voice would not come. She put her two arms about his neck and drawing his head down upon her shoulder gave up the struggle to keep back the tears.

For a long time they remained thus in each other's arms, until at last there was a stirring in the room where King lay, and Cherry got up. Before she left her father she pressed his head close to her, and leaning over, kissed him on the cheek. Then she hurried away to answer King's call.

Keith McBain got up, and putting on his hat, went out alone to look about the camp before turning in for the night. Just before he started back for the cabin he went to the corral and looked over his team. He patted their flanks and sides and rubbed their necks affectionately, and then spoke to the corral foreman.

"I'll want the little team first thing in the morning," he said, and went out again.

When he returned to the cabin Cherry was standing in the doorway.

"I'll be going to town first thing in the morning," he said, as he went into the cabin with her.

"Father—please—"

There was pleading in her voice, the meaning of which Keith McBain could not mistake.

"No," he said quickly, "there'll be nothing this time to trouble you—this time or any other time. That's all past, my girl."

Cherry would have kissed her father again had he not turned away too quickly and gone to his room.

The next morning Keith McBain was early on the grade and stayed long enough to see that the work was going on very much as usual. McCartney had

come back to camp during the night and was in his place as foreman when the men took their accustomed places. Old Silent slipped away and was not seen again during the day.

Late that night he drove into camp, gave his team over to the care of the corral foreman and went to his cabin without a word to any of the men. His only word was to Cherry, to enquire—somewhat more eagerly than usual, she thought—concerning King's condition. Then he ate his supper and went to bed.

During the days that followed, Cherry watched her father with growing anxiety. The care that was necessary to give King was growing less each day—so rapid was his recovery, and her mind was more free to dwell upon other things. It had become quite clear to her that a change was coming over her father, though she could not account for it. Sometimes she found him unusually cheerful; he became even talkative at times—especially when he sat with King in the evenings after the day's work was done. On such occasions, when her father's spirits were light, her own joy scarcely knew limits.

But as a rule, he was silent, even morose at times. He ate his meals without speaking. He spent his evenings alone outside, where he sat near the doorway and smoked incessantly, until it was so dark he could not see. Often he left the cabin soon after supper and went off walking by himself along the right-of-way, or into the hills, coming back late, and apparently very tired. Something was weighing very heavily upon his mind every minute of the day. Sometimes at night, long after he had gone to bed, Cherry heard him coughing and tossing about restlessly, unable to go to sleep.

King, as he grew daily stronger, talked with Cherry about her father. He had not failed to notice the change that had come over him, and was almost as anxious about him as Cherry herself was. The last conversation of any length that he had had with Keith McBain was on the first afternoon that King had walked from his room to the chair that Cherry had placed for him outside under the tamaracs. Once before, while he was still lying in bed, he had asked the old man about the claim in the hills. Keith McBain had dismissed the subject at once by assuring him in the fewest possible words that everything was all right. But when he came down from the grade and found King sitting outside in the warm sunlight, and looking very much as he had always looked, he had taken a seat near him, lighted his pipe leisurely—and had told King the whole truth about the affair. King had received the news without comment, and Keith McBain, after lingering a while, had left and gone back to where the men were at work on the grade.

Then followed a week during which virtually nothing was said, except what passed between Cherry and King, and a word of quiet greeting now and then when the old man came in to eat his meals.

But during the week King Howden and Cherry McBain faced together the strange problem that life had set before them, not knowing exactly what was hidden behind the silent bearing of the man who was at the centre of it, conscious only of the fact that they were pleased to face it together.

King regained strength very rapidly and was soon able to take short walks in the afternoons and evenings. He never went alone, except when Cherry went riding. Then he strolled slowly along the little path that led into the hills, the path down which he had come with Cherry on that afternoon when he had found her picking berries and had come back to supper with her.

On one of these little strolls he had gone as far as the pool beside which he had knelt with her for a drink of fresh water. Once again he knelt down, and placing his hands upon a small boulder, leaned forward and took a drink. Again he paused in the act of getting up and looked at the reflection in the water. His face was thin and his cheek showed pale under the tan. And yet he was gloriously conscious of returning vigor. The fresh air, fragrant with the sweetness of the pine woods, filled him with new strength at every breath, and his very blood was riotous to be in action again and take up the challenge of life in a young man's land.

And yet there was one lingering regret. The days that were just coming to a close had been days of sweet companionship with Cherry. Now those days were almost at an end. In less than a week he would get into his saddle again and ride away, with nothing but a memory to carry with him into the days that lay before him.

He sat down on a fallen timber that lay close to the pool and afforded a natural resting-place, well-shaded and conveniently near the path. In the woods behind him he heard Sal leaping and rushing about, giving chase to an imaginary rabbit, or barking a reply to a saucy jay. Already the birds were beginning to flock. A few score descended like a rush of wind and filled the branches of a near-by poplar that had already taken on its autumn colors and stood like a yellow flame against the dark background of evergreens. It was a day—and it was the time of year—when youth grows pensive and the melancholy of the year creeps into the veins of one.

For a long time King sat and gave himself over to the season's food. How long he sat he did not know. He had lost, for the time being, his sense of passing hours. But he was awakened suddenly by the sound of someone coming, and the next moment Cherry appeared and came running down the pathway towards him.

"Isn't it funny," she said, sitting down beside him on the log, "but when I came back and found you gone, I knew at once you would be here. It seems the very place for such a day. Isn't it glorious?"

"I think I'd like to be getting better for a long time," King replied. "Don't you think you could have someone hit me on the head again—just hard enough to lay me out for a few days and give me a long time to get over it?"

Cherry laughed.

"No—I want to see you like yourself again," she replied. "You look more like yourself to-day than you have yet."

She leaned towards him and scrutinized his face.

"And you're beginning to get a little color back, too," she commented in a very matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh, I'm feeling fit—ready for the mail any day now," he replied. "And I guess I'll be going back to it soon—about the end of the week."

"Three more days," Cherry mused.

"It isn't long, is it?" he asked.

"No," Cherry replied, and the conversation seemed to have come to an end.

At last King leaned forward a little and looked into the little pool of water at their feet.

"If I could talk," he said, as if he were thinking aloud, "if I could only talk a little—I'd tell you that you have been very kind to me since—"

"Don't talk about that, King," she said quickly. "I have done nothing."

King was silent again for a moment.

"I guess I'm no talker, at all," he said.

"You do very well sometimes—when you're delirious," she replied, laughing.

King was no longer proof against her playful mood. And yet when he got up, and taking her hand in his, announced that it was already time for her to go back to the cabin if there was to be any supper for her father, she got to her feet reluctantly enough and walked away with King in a strange mood, and very silent.

After supper that night Keith McBain called his daughter to him where he was sitting in his accustomed place, just outside the doorway. In a moment Cherry entered the cabin again and donned a light jacket.

"Father wants me to walk with him a little," she said to King. "We'll be back again soon."

King went to the doorway and watched the two as they walked away from the cottage, Cherry leaning upon her father's arm. When they had disappeared he sat down and allowed his mind to wander at will over the events of the weeks that were now coming to a close. He was more anxious than ever, now that his plans in regard to the timber claim in the hills had been frustrated, to get back as soon as he was able to ride, and talk things over with Hugh Hurley.

It was quite dark by the time Cherry and her father returned to the cabin.

King noticed at once the serious expression on Cherry's face and the complete absence of any sign of the playful mood she displayed before going out with her father. She appeared not to notice King where he was sitting a few feet from the doorway, and walked into the cabin without saying a word.

Keith McBain, however, remained outside, and drawing a chair towards King, sat down beside him and began to talk at once.

"You are just about well again, Howden," he said, moving a little closer in order that he might be able to see King's face in the darkness. "The girl tells me that you will be leaving us in a few days now—about the end of the week."

"I think so, sir," King replied. "I have wanted to tell you how much I owe—"

"Tut, tut, man—that's nothing!" the old man broke in. "No—we all do such things—any of us when the need comes. You may have to take me in some time—who knows?"

"If the time ever comes——" King began.

"I know, I know," he interrupted again. "That's partly why I want to talk to you. Howden, you're a young man yet—about——"

"Just past twenty-eight, sir," King interjected.

"Twenty-eight—aye. I didn't think you were so old even as that. Still that's young enough for one of your experience."

He paused for a moment, during which he seemed to be thinking very hard.

"There was something I have thought lately I'd like to tell you," he went on at last. "I want to tell you because I think you can listen with a man's ears and understand with a man's heart. Men don't go through life as a rule, Howden, without carrying a few secrets along with them. The most of us have memories that we'd gladly forget—if we could. All of us have our secrets—things we never tell, even to our best friends. And there's nothing wrong with that—it would be wrong if we told it. The world is a pretty fair sort, my boy, and life is worth living, in spite of the wrongs we do. It isn't such a bad rule, I've found, to keep your mouth shut—if opening it is going to cause trouble for anyone."

He was silent for a while, as if he wished the truth of his statement to sink deep into King's mind.

"But there are times when it's best to speak out," he went on. "A little trouble sometimes saves a deal more later on. And that's the point I'm coming to. There was a time in my life when I had no secret. I went about my work every day and had little to worry me besides the day's work as it came. But I grew ambitious. When you see a man that's over-ambitious you can count on trouble lying somewhere waiting for him. There are too many ambitious men in the world, Howden, to make it easy for anyone to be ambitious and be happy. There were two of us—a man I thought was a friend—and I'm not often fooled

in men—and myself. When we found things were going too slow to satisfy us we went west to the mines for one season and staked some claims. We stayed the winter in a little mining town that didn't live long enough to get a name for itself. There isn't a man on the ground now. But for one season it was a lively place. Another man joined us after we'd been there a short time and the three of us went prospecting together. We were out for weeks on one trip without any luck, until we gave up and started back to camp. When men have tramped for weeks together through blizzards, and broken fresh trails against howling winds, they're either going to be great friends, or they're going to break. I was the oldest—the other two were young and better able to stand it than I was. And it wasn't long before I began to feel as if I was in the way. The grub was getting low, too, and hungry men are not good companions on the road. Last day out from camp the impossible happened. After going for weeks without luck of any kind we ran upon it when we were least expecting it. The fact is, Howden, I ran upon it. I found it—and I claimed it for my own, for the other two had told me they couldn't hold back for me any longer and had gone on. That night I got into camp—they had got in early in the day. There was a lot of drinking going on, and about midnight there was a fight.”

Keith McBain placed his hand over his eyes for a moment and then ran his fingers slowly across his forehead.

”I never knew exactly what happened. All I remember was some shots and a man lying on the floor. I had a gun in my hand—and it was smoking. The thought of what I had done sobered me at once, and my first fear was for my wife and girl. Had it not been for them, Howden, I swear I'd have given myself up right there. But I couldn't do that. I asked the other man—the man I thought was my friend—you may as well know who—it was big Bill McCartney—I asked him to get me out of it. At first he argued with me, but at last I persuaded him and he helped me get away. In a few days he joined me again and we came back. Then one night I made a bargain with him. The affair was to remain a secret between us and he was to take the claim and get what he could from it. He went west again and I took to the construction—and have lived the life of the damned ever since. I told my wife—and she died. Then McCartney came back. Now he wants everything. He knows he has my life in his hands—and he's going to make me pay. I made him foreman. He's not satisfied with that. He wanted the claim in the hills—and got it. Sometimes I have been glad he did get it. I have been afraid to stand before that man, Howden—the only man I have ever been afraid of. And I'm not afraid for myself either. But the girl there—he wants her—has wanted her for a long time, and says he's going to get her. To-night I told her the whole story—just as I've told it to you. And she says if the price has to be paid—she'll pay it. That's Cherry, my boy. The hour has come for me, Howden.

We can't run camp very late this year. The weather's been bad. When the break-up comes, there will be plans to lay for next year. McCartney will speak—there will be words—there are always words when we talk business. But this will be the last. A man's life is nothing—he can take me, but—God in heaven—there's a limit!"

He got up from his chair and stood a moment before King. Then he extended his hand and King took it.

"We shall speak of this again, Howden," he said. "Now that there's nothing between us we can talk without being afraid. There'll be plans to talk over—and I'd like to talk them over with you."

He turned and went into the cabin without giving King a chance to speak, and King sat down again and went over in his own mind the details of the story Keith McBain had told him.

It must have been an hour later—King did not know how long he had been there alone—when he heard Cherry's step in the cabin, and lifting his eyes, saw her standing in the doorway.

"You must go to bed," she said, and her voice betrayed the fact that she had been weeping.

He looked at her a moment without speaking. Then he got up and turned towards her.

"Come out a minute, Cherry," he said, very softly.

She stepped down, and coming to where he stood, waited for him to speak. Taking her arm he led her off a short distance along the path, where they had walked together only a few hours before. Neither of them spoke until they had reached a point in the pathway from which only the light of the cabin was visible through the heavy, low-hanging branches of the trees.

Then King stopped and faced her, with his two hands resting on her shoulders.

"Your father has told me the whole story, Cherry," he said.

Cherry's head dropped and her shoulders shook under King's hands.

"I didn't think it was so bad," she sobbed.

"Cherry," he said abruptly, and in a voice so commanding that it was almost harsh.

The sobbing ceased suddenly and Cherry looked up expectantly.

"It ain't so bad," he said in a gentler voice.

"But what—" she began.

"I don't know," he replied quickly. "One thing at a time, I guess—that's enough to think about."

"But I can't let father—"

"Wait," King interrupted again. "McCartney's bad—bad clean through.

Some time—sooner or later—a bad man makes a mistake. I think Bill McCartney’s mistake is about due. He’s made one bad mistake already—maybe more—but one, anyhow.”

”What has he done?” Cherry asked.

King, for once, found it easy to talk.

”He has made up his mind he’ll have you,” he replied quickly. ”But he’s made a mistake. I’m going to have you, Cherry!”

She took a step away from him and regarded him seriously for a moment.

”There’ll be some things to settle first,” he went on. ”But when they’re settled—I’m coming.”

For a while Cherry allowed her mind to return to the doubts that had lurked there for many days. She wanted to ask King the question that had been in her mind ever since the evening she had ridden into town in the dusk. Then she heard King’s voice again—slow, resolute, and touched with deep emotion.

”Just now,” he said, ”I’d like to kiss you—but I’ll wait—I’ll wait till I deserve it more. Cherry McBain, I’m going to fight for you.”

He drew her towards him and looked long into her eyes. Then he turned her about and started towards the cabin. Together they walked in silence until they were within a few feet of the door, and then Cherry paused and turned to King.

”King Howden,” she said, looking up at him, ”you’re—you’re stupid!”

Before King could make reply she threw her arms suddenly around his neck and kissed him once impulsively, passionately, and then fled into the cabin.

After a while King Howden, wondering a great deal about his own stupidity, passed into the cabin and went to bed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

October set in as no other October had done within the memory of Keith McBain.

”It does nothing but rain in this country from the looks of things,” he said to old Gabe Smith, who was going over the works with his old boss. ”There’s nothing for us but an early close—we may as well shut down at once. Last night the sun set clear and—look at it now.”

It was late afternoon and the whole sky was heavy. The sun had broken through the clouds in the west, but behind the clouds the sky was red. The breeze

that rustled in the poplars was chill—even cold—and carried the yellow leaves before it, or lifted them from the ground in little eddying gusts that whirled sharply in the open for a moment and then lost themselves in the closer branches of the shrubbery.

"We've had frost nearly every night this week," Gabe offered by way of corroborating what Keith McBain had said. "A little more and there'll be no workin' with the slushers at all."

McBain walked a short distance in silence and then turned back towards the camp.

"No use going any farther," he remarked at last, as if he were talking to himself. "This job's about done, anyhow, and the next move will be clear up to the valley—just north of town. Might as well hustle up the bit that's left here and move the outfit into town for the winter. It'll give us an early start for the spring, anyhow."

It required all of two weeks to complete what was still left of the work Keith McBain had contracted for at that point in the right-of-way where his camp had stood for the months of August and September. With good weather conditions it would have been completed in three or four days. But every morning found the ground that had been wet the day before frozen into a hard crust that made work impossible until noon. The work dragged along at a rate that would have tried the patience of anyone. It kept Keith McBain in a state of ill-temper from which, during the whole of the two weeks, he never recovered.

During those two weeks, however, the men who worked for Keith McBain were conscious of a change in the old contractor's manner that pleased some quite as much as it displeased others. In September it had been freely admitted by all that the old man was losing his grip. His power was going. His commands were not always obeyed, and no one retreated before his outbursts of profanity as they had once done.

But now—Old Silent was back on the job, loved and hated as before, driving his men recklessly in their labors and sparing himself as little as he spared his men, building from day to day, as conditions permitted, as if the whole responsibility of constructing a great national transcontinental highway rested upon his shoulders alone. The change was so complete, and so sudden, too, that the men marvelled. At first they observed it individually and thought it over quietly, without offering any comment. Later they began to discuss it in groups. Soon it became the chief topic of conversation.

Under ordinary circumstances little consideration would have been given to Keith McBain's return to his former habits. The men would have observed it, mentioned it casually, perhaps, and with smiles on their faces—and gone back to their work. But the circumstances under which the change had taken place were

not ordinary. No man in the camp—not even McCartney—could account for it. The explanation was hidden behind Old Silent's grey, inscrutable countenance. As a matter of fact, the discussions in which the men engaged during the long, chilly evenings were not prompted solely—nor in the main—by any desire to find the explanation.

No one would have spoken at any length on the subject had it not been for the fact that among the men working for Keith McBain were a number who for some time had refused to admit that Keith McBain was recovering from his long period of inefficiency and weak management. When they were finally forced to admit what was so obvious that no one could remain blind to it, they became violent in their dislike for his harsh methods and intolerant moods. When they could no longer discredit him they began to denounce him. The group was a formidable element in camp—and was led ostensibly by McCartney, who doubtless saw one of his fondest hopes declining.

One incident that occurred during those two weeks marked the turning point in all the discussions that were going on. The night had been cold, with rain and a little snow, the first of the season. The morning was wet, and underfoot the ground was slushy. The men had risen at the usual time and gone to breakfast at the sound of the gong. When breakfast was almost over, but before any man had yet risen from the table, Keith McBain appeared in the doorway of the cook-camp and ordered the men out as usual. No word was spoken in reply and McBain, after waiting a moment in the doorway of the camp, went out to prepare for the day's work. No sooner had he disappeared than protests broke loose from fully half the men at once. They appealed to McCartney, and leaving the table, went off in a surly mood to the bunk house, confident that, if anything could be done, McCartney would do it. McBain himself was already out on the grade, and McCartney strode over boldly to apprise him of the temper of the men.

Not more than three of the men heard the interview between Old Silent and his foreman. But all three heard alike—and the reports that all three brought in concerning what they had seen were sufficiently similar to leave no one in doubt as to their being, in the main, correct. McCartney's first word had brought Keith McBain down on him like a hurricane, before which the foreman had capitulated, even cringed, and had asked the old boss to speak to the men himself.

And Keith McBain had spoken to the men, with the result that only two in the whole camp refused to go to work. These he promptly handed over to the time-keeper, who gave them their time, and Keith McBain personally supervised their departure from camp before he went back to his men on the grade.

From that time forward there was no doubting that the old railroad boss was still to be seriously reckoned with by any man who questioned his ability to look after his own affairs. From that time forward, moreover, the question was

not so much one of whether Keith McBain was as strong a man as Bill McCartney. It was rather a question of which of the two men they were prepared to follow. For McCartney had sworn in the presence of everyone that night that he was going to break Keith McBain, and do it so completely that—well, they were to watch him and they would see for themselves.

That night the camp was split into two factions. The division had been creeping in for months. It was now complete. On one side were the men who had succumbed to McCartney's loud boastings, and had found in certain dark hints that he had given concerning the old contractor's past, good food for fattening an old-time grudge. On the other side were the men who hated McCartney as much as they sympathized with Keith McBain, and generally speaking there was a strong affection for the old contractor in spite of his harsh manner. Night after night during those two weeks the breach between the two factions broadened, and on a half-dozen occasions threatened to end in a free fight.

In the meantime King Howden rapidly recovered his normal condition. Twice he had gone to the end-of-the-steel for the mail, and had returned to town after his long trips in better spirits than when he had left. On each trip he managed to drop off at McBain's camp about meal-time, and spend an hour or more talking to Cherry and her father. But not once did the difficult position in which Keith McBain was placed come up for discussion. Nor did King Howden drop as much as a hint to Cherry that he still remembered the night when he had stood alone under the tamaracs and had made known his determination to win in the game he was playing with Bill McCartney.

The third trip, however, was different from the others. Cherry had secretly been expecting King all day long. He arrived finally late in the afternoon, and with him Anne. Cherry received the girl with as much cordiality as she could command. The four took supper together and King went at once, leaving Anne with Cherry until he returned.

That night Keith McBain retired early and left the two girls alone together. In spite of herself, Cherry found her heart warming towards Anne as the evening wore on.

"Don't you sometimes find it hard to be alone so much, Anne?" she asked, when their conversation had drifted into more or less personal channels.

Anne's reply was at first non-committal.

"Ain't you alone, too?" she asked.

"Yes," Cherry replied, "and I feel—sometimes—as if I can't stand it any longer. But then—I have my father."

"Yes," Anne responded, "it's different. An' when you ask me if I find it hard—I do. Sometimes—well, I just don't think about it. If I started thinkin' I'd go crazy. But thinkin' doesn't get you anywhere."

They were both silent for some time, Cherry intent upon some sewing that she was doing, Anne sitting watching her across the table. At last Cherry made another effort.

"I hope you won't think it funny of me, Anne," she remarked, looking up at the girl and smiling, "but I have never known you by anything other than—just Anne. King never introduced us properly."

"There's been mighty little time for introducin' anyone," Anne replied.

"Yes; but King has never even told me your name," Cherry continued.

Anne was not quick to answer. "Reason is," she said slowly, after a long pause, "he didn't know it himself."

Cherry's face expressed surprise.

"But I thought you and he were good friends," she remarked—and something of the old Eve was rising in her. She had been struggling all evening to keep it down, but now she found herself searching Anne's face for the slightest change of color or expression that would betray her feelings.

The girl spoke very quietly. "We are—if you want to put it like that," she replied.

There was a note in Anne's voice that was unmistakably cold, and Cherry reproached herself at once.

"Really, Anne," she said, and she turned her eyes away as she spoke; "I didn't mean to be personal. Please forgive me."

"That's nothin'!" replied Anne quickly. "Fact is—when I came to the settlement I wanted nothin' better than to be left alone. When I hired with MacMurray he asked me my name an' I told him 'Anne'. If he'd asked what else—I'd 'a' lied to him. But he didn't. An' no one else ever asked till just now. I could lie about it—but I'm not goin' to. When I tell you—I'll tell you straight. Better leave it at that."

Though Anne's voice was cold and without feeling, Cherry knew that at heart the girl was tender, even affectionate. When Anne got up from where she had been sitting and went to the window where she stood looking out into the night, Cherry set aside her sewing and followed her. For a moment she stood behind Anne, neither of them speaking a word.

At last Cherry put her arms about her and held her in a warm, impulsive embrace.

"Anne," she said, "let's be friends. I'm alone—and so are you. But you're older than I am, and I want you to like me."

Anne turned to her and looked at her very steadily for a long time before she spoke.

"Ain't you like the rest of them?" she asked.

Cherry did not understand the question.

"What rest—who?" she asked in surprise.

"Oh, the whole bunch," Anne jerked out impatiently; "the women in the town. They don't like me—an' they go out o' the way to show it. God!—sometimes I hate to think I belong to them—but they ain't women."

"Oh, yes, they are, Anne," Cherry replied, "but they don't understand, that's all."

"Understand? Understand—nothin'! I was ready to like them before I understood them. When I got to understand them—I passed 'em up. One good thing—they ain't many—so it don't matter much."

"Well, don't put me with them, Anne," Cherry returned.

Anne did not reply at once, but when she did there was caution in her tone.

"Do you remember the first time you saw me?" she asked.

"Yes."

Cherry had remembered—the memory of it had burned itself into her brain.

"Did you speak to me then as if you understood?" Anne questioned.

Cherry remained silent.

"An' then for two days," Anne continued, "did you act like you understood and wanted to be friends?"

Cherry could stand the questioning no longer.

"Anne, Anne," she pleaded, "don't talk like that. Let me tell you—can't you see what it all means, Anne—I love him—I was jealous."

"Jealous?" Anne stood back from her in surprise.

"When I saw you standing—"

"You mean King?" Anne asked her suddenly.

Cherry nodded her head.

At first Anne seemed about to laugh, but the smile died on her lips.

"Listen to me," she said. "Where'd you get that? If I was goin' to pick someone right now—I'd pick King Howden. But I ain't pickin' anyone, an' I'll tell you why. Now, you get this straight. In the first place he wouldn't stand for me, that's all there is to that. He never told me, because we never talked about it—but I don't have to be told. Anyhow, all that don't matter—it's nowhere with me. There's another reason—I ain't lookin' for a partner. I wasn't goin' to tell you this—but you might as well know."

She paused a moment and looked at Cherry.

"D'you know," she continued meditatively, "I didn't want to make this trip down here this time. I wasn't comin', only King Howden told me to come an' get on talkin' terms with you. I didn't like you—but I came because he wanted me to. That's how much I like him, an' it's a whole lot. But I'm glad I came. I think I'll get to likin' you—I like you now—or I wouldn't tell you what I never told another soul in this part o' the world. The reason I ain't choosin' anythin'

particular among the 'legible gents that's hangin' round is that I—I made a choice once. It was sure a bad one, but—I'm standin' by it."

"You're not married, Anne?" exclaimed Cherry in surprise.

Anne nodded in the affirmative.

"I was once, anyhow," she commented with a smile.

Cherry could say nothing in reply—so complete was her surprise.

"Just now," Anne added, after a moment of silence, "I'm doin' what most women have to do sooner or later—I'm stayin' round to keep my old man from makin' an ass of himself. The most of 'em will do it if they're left alone."

"Then he's here?" Cherry exclaimed with fresh surprise.

"Lord, yes—he's here," Anne replied.

When Cherry did not reply Anne took her hands and looked long and steadily into her eyes.

"My name," she said slowly, "is Anne—Anne McCartney."

For once Cherry checked herself before she put her thoughts into words. She drew Anne towards her and held her close for a long time in silence.

In her heart was a riot of confused emotions. She could not resist the overwhelming satisfaction she felt upon learning at last that her suspicions concerning King were foolish and without foundation. She reproached herself inwardly for having entertained such fears. Then her self-reproach vanished before the supreme joy that came to her—he was still the man she had known him to be when first they rode together on the trail. It was only natural that the hatred she had for McCartney should now cause her some uneasiness in the presence of the woman who bore his name. In the end her heart went out in pity to the girl who was struggling through life with a burden such as she herself knew nothing of.

It was this feeling that was strongest in her heart as she pressed Anne very close to her and kissed her. Anne sensed at once what was in Cherry's mind, and drew back.

"Don't start pityin' me," she said abruptly. "I did it—an' I did it with my eyes open. An' now that I've told you"—she put her fingers to her lips—"don't muss everything. You got that out o' me when I—I forgot myself."

She spoke impatiently, but Cherry hurried to reassure her.

"You can trust me, Anne," she said.

"When it comes to that," Anne replied, "there's nobody like your own self. Still—I'm goin' to count on you—not a word."

That night was the longest night Cherry McBain had ever known. So many questions chased each other through her mind that sleep was impossible. She felt herself the plaything of a score of different forces, at the mercy of cross-currents over which she had no control and against which it was useless for her to battle.

One thing especially troubled her. Should she have told Anne all she knew

about McCartney? She had hesitated because her father was so vitally involved. Besides, she didn't know what plans were in King's mind. When the first grey of the dawn came through her window she had come to a decision: she would tell Anne all about it in the morning.

When they were alone together after they had eaten their breakfast, Cherry summoned all her courage and began her story. Anne stopped her before she had spoken a dozen words.

"You're not tellin' me a thing I don't know," she said. "Didn't I say I was here to keep Bill McCartney from playin' the damn fool? Well, he'll do that in spite of me—but I'm not goin' to let him make as big a fool of others as he has of me. Let's go and look at the horses."

Early that afternoon King arrived, and Anne went back to town with him. Cherry stood on the trail at the end of the pathway leading from the cabin, and watched them until they were out of sight. She was on the point of turning back again to the cabin when she caught sight of her father coming towards her.

"Well, girl," said Keith McBain when he had joined her, "the work's over. We begin moving the outfit to-morrow."

Cherry had been expecting the announcement every day for the past week, but when it actually came at last it found her sad in the thought of leaving the spot where all that had ever mattered much in her life—save the death of her mother—had occurred.

"I can get ready any time, father," she replied. "But—I'll hate to leave my trees—and my cabin—and my hills."

The old man looked down at his daughter and smiled. Then he put his arm about her and the two went off down the pathway together.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next day Keith McBain's men began to break up the old camp. By night the first wagons were loaded and ready for the trail in the morning. McBain's decision to store his outfit in The Town rather than take it to the end-of-the-steel, met with the men's approval. It meant a shorter haul, and it meant a foregathering of the men from farther up the line, including Rubble's gang, as a sort of final

wind-up of the season's activities. In three days there was nothing left of the old camp, except a few walls and foundations—and the little log cabin in the shelter of the tamaracs. Keith McBain had acceded to his daughter's wish to remain "just another day," and had allowed his men, under the supervision of McCartney and Gabe Smith, to go ahead and complete the task of putting the outfit under cover and preparing winter shelter for the horses.

When Cherry and her father arrived just a day after the last freight team, the place had already begun to take on a holiday appearance. They were met by Hugh Hurley, who took them at once to his cottage, where he insisted upon their staying until McBain could have a cabin of his own erected. Leaving Cherry with Mrs. Hurley, Old Silent went out to see what had been accomplished by his men. Scarcely an hour's work had been done, under either old Gabe or McCartney, towards storing the equipment, and half the men were already showing the effects of frequent visits to Cheney's. Gabe was the first to meet McBain when he arrived, and at once he confessed that scarcely a thing had been accomplished. The old contractor laid his plans carefully and with quiet deliberation. He had a long talk with Hugh Hurley, and together the two visited King Howden in his shack on the ridge, where the three talked late into the night.

Next morning Keith McBain was out at daybreak rounding up his gang and getting them ready for the day's work. He found nearly half of them unable to report for duty, but the others responded readily, and were soon at work hauling timbers and clearing spaces for the erection of the corrals. When they were well under way McBain went to Hurley's office, where he found King Howden, and bringing him out, put him in charge of the men.

Until noon the work went along quite smoothly, and Keith McBain watched King with approval growing in his heart. Noon, however, brought the discovery to McCartney, and to those who had not responded to McBain's call, that the work was apparently proceeding successfully without them. For an hour or so there were petty councils here and there, in MacMurray's and Cheney's places particularly, and one by one the men stepped away and went to work, though many of them took their directions from King with ill enough grace. Keith McBain and Hugh Hurley watched the process from the latter's office, and smiled to themselves at what they saw. Before night a scant half dozen were all that remained aloof from the operations—these and Bill McCartney, who had stayed discreetly apart all day.

Nightfall found Cheney's place crowded to the door. There was a feeling of expectancy in the air and the men gathered quickly and fell to discussing the events of the day. But discussion led nowhere. There seemed to be general disagreement on almost every point that was raised. McCartney stood back from the crowd with a smile fixed on his face, apparently enjoying the discomfiture and al-

lowing the men to develop their differences as they wished. What he wanted just now was disorganization and confusion—the more of it the better. Any organization must of necessity centre round Keith McBain, who was the sole embodiment of authority of any kind in the place. When disorder had broken McBain's control McCartney's moment would arrive. And he was confident that the card he would play was sufficiently high to win the game.

The men were not altogether blind to the strangely quiescent attitude that McCartney had so suddenly assumed. Late that night, when the discussion was at its highest, someone suddenly turned upon him.

"Ain't you in on this, Bill McCartney?" asked one of the men who had been a participant in more than one heated argument during the evening.

"Sure, I'm in on it," he replied, "but I'm not talkin' just now."

"Not talkin' just now? Hell, when are you goin' to do your talkin'?"

By this time the men had turned their attention to McCartney, and stood waiting for his reply.

"Well, boys," he said, with a sneer, "I'll begin talkin' when I'm good and ready to talk."

There was a moment's silence and then, almost in an instant, the confusion of voices was as great as ever.

When the general hubbub was at its highest Tom Rickard edged his way towards McCartney and touched him on the shoulder. In a moment the two were back against the wall where they could talk without being overheard.

"You're playin' a fool's game, Bill," Rickard said in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper. "You're lettin' go when you could speak one word and the boys would back you up to a man."

McCartney looked at Rickard a moment with a puzzled expression. He seemed to be trying to settle with himself whether or not Rickard was to be trusted. At last he smiled, a little patronizingly, and laid a hand upon Rickard's shoulder.

"Tom," he said, quietly, "you'd better let me play this hand the way I want to. I could get them to-night—I know that—but I want them later on. I've got something to say—and when the time comes I'm goin' to say it—don't worry. But there's something to be done first."

He paused and gave Rickard another searching glance.

"Are you still playin' this game with me?" he asked pointedly.

Rickard looked about him quickly. Then he moved close to McCartney and put out his hand. McCartney took it and nudged him gently with his elbow.

"Come outside—it's gettin' close in here."

They went out without attracting any special attention, and when they had closed the door behind them McCartney turned towards the river. They walked

the full length of the street without speaking, stopping only once to take a glance through the window at MacMurray's, where a crowd of men were gathered in the front room. When they stood at last on the bank of the river, McCartney nodded his head towards Hurley's office, standing back a short way from the street. There was a light in the window.

"Old Hugh is workin' late," he said, with a grunt of sarcasm.

Rickard followed McCartney along the bank, until they came to the space the men had cleared in the brush during the day. A half dozen large timbers had already been hauled to the site of the new corral, and the first four had been squared and fitted together to make the foundation. A little farther down a cut had been made in the steep clay banks that ordinarily rose some fifteen feet above the water in the river, to provide a passage-way for the horses going to water. From where they stood they could see the lantern in the hands of the corral foreman, as he went about taking a last look at the horses before retiring for the night. Besides the stamping of the horses' feet on the ground, there was not a sound except the running of the water in the stream below them, now swollen from the rains of the past couple of weeks.

McCartney sat down quietly on one of the timbers and beckoned Rickard to a place beside him.

"This looks like a bit of deep plottin'," McCartney said when Rickard was seated. "Well, forget the melodrama, Tom. It may look stagey, but I'm real serious—an' I'm goin' to be real careful, too."

MacMurray's door opened, letting out a flood of light, and McCartney ceased speaking till the door was closed.

"You were with me on one bit of business a few weeks ago, Tom," he continued. "I've got no kick comin'—you did all you could, an' we came pretty near to gettin' away with it at that. If the old man could 'a' been kept in town another day we'd 'a' swung the thing good. It wouldn't 'a' mattered a damn whether he ever came back."

"And we'd 'a' done it, too, if it hadn't been for just one thing—Anne handed the old man an ace—an' he bobbed up in camp about twenty-four hours too soon. And Anne's goin' to queer this deal right through unless we can keep her out. Now, listen to me. I know that girl—just between us, I knew her before I ever came here—an' I can tell you right now what she's goin' to do. No use goin' into cases—but I know. Anne's got to be put away—nothin' rough, y'understand—"

The sound of someone approaching from behind them caused McCartney to cease speaking and get up. The corral foreman was returning to MacMurray's.

"Come on," McCartney whispered quickly, and led the way, with Rickard following closely behind him. They did not exchange a word until they had gone some distance up the street in the direction of Cheney's. The presence of a num-

ber of men in the street made further conversation impossible, and they entered Cheney's place, where McCartney sought at once to make amends for his previous aloofness during the evening by inviting the men to come up and "have one on him."

In Hurley's office the three men, Keith McBain, King Howden and Hugh Hurley himself, sat late that night reviewing the events of the day and considering their possible bearing on the immediate future. For the benefit of Hugh Hurley, Keith McBain had gone to some length in tracing the course of events during the past few weeks.

"But what's his idea—what's his plan?" asked Hurley, after McBain had completed his account.

Keith McBain was silent a moment before he replied.

"Bill McCartney wants more—more than I can tell you, Hurley—he wants—"

King saw the struggle that the old man was having and came at once to his relief.

"I guess he wants all he can get," he broke in. "There's only one thing to do now, Mr. Hurley—we can't have him round this place—he's got to get out."

Hurley smiled.

"You're beginning to talk business, King," replied Hurley. "If you believe what you say—you ought to be able to go where your faith leads you."

King looked at him questioningly.

"I mean that McCartney will stay here till he's put out," the old man continued.

"That's what I mean," King replied quickly.

Hurley's smile broadened. "I can't put the duffer out."

"I didn't expect you could," King responded.

"Can you?"

King had asked himself the same question scores of times and had made his own reply. He expressed it now as he had expressed it to himself every time the question had arisen in his own mind.

"Bill McCartney and King Howden can't live in the same place this winter," he said, looking straight into Hurley's eyes. "And I ain't going away."

When they had finished talking the three men shook hands quietly. They had entered into a covenant on behalf of a few hundred serious men and women who had set their faces months before towards the setting sun and had followed the trail over the hills and into the little valley, where lay the only hopes that life had still to offer them—the hidden valley at the rainbow's end.

And two of those three men slept as men sleep who are without care and are content with the day that is done. But Keith McBain could not sleep for the

thought of the price he had already paid and the price that he was even yet to pay for his own folly.

The week that followed was one of unceasing labor and careful vigilance on the part of Hugh Hurley and Keith McBain. King went forward with the work he had been given to do by Keith McBain, and paid not the slightest heed to petty obstructions that were being thrown in his way every day by men who, though pretending to serve their old boss, were really actuated by the designs of which McCartney was the maker and the inspirer.

No one was unaware of McCartney's intriguing. Signs of it were in evidence everywhere. In spite of King's endeavors to hold his men together and secure concerted effort, there were little breaks and hindrances that temporarily offset his best attempts to direct the work along effective lines. Especially active among those who sided with McCartney was Tom Rickard, who had joined the gang of men under King's direction with no other object whatever than the frustration of all efforts to produce harmony among the men.

Towards the end of the week, however, the division between the two sides, represented by McCartney's supporters on the one hand, and on the other by the men who were still faithful to Keith McBain and took kindly to King's methods, was so marked that an open break seemed imminent. The threatening attitude of the opposition to King was so apparent that many of his men grew impatient with his quiet forbearance.

To make matters worse, the weather, that had been so unfavorable for almost a month, had turned from bad to worse. The river had risen so that the men were no longer able to get logs for building purposes from the opposite side of the stream, and were forced to make long hauls through wet brush and over rain-soaked ground, until their spirits were tested almost to the limit of endurance.

McCartney was as much a student of conditions as he was an intriguer, and was not slow to recognize that, given a little more work under conditions that were nearly impossible, the break that he so ardently desired was inevitable. He stood to one side, or walked about with a smirk on his face that expressed only too well his confidence in the outcome.

At one point, however, his calculations failed. Friday night found the work almost completed. In spite of all obstacles, the end of another day would see all the horses under cover and housed in buildings that would provide comfortable quarters during the weeks that lay between the closing of construction work and the opening of the tie-camps—for neither Hurley nor King would admit for a moment that the camps in the hills would not be running. They did not know how it was to be done, but they did not allow themselves to entertain the slightest

doubt that the claim now registered in the name of McCartney would yet be worked without his permission or assistance.

Keith McBain was not nearly so sanguine. He knew—as no one else knew, except King and Cherry—that McCartney still held his high card and would play it when the time was ripe. What the results would be he could not guess—he could see nothing but chaos and disintegration ahead. King clung to the hope—it was a sort of blind faith with him—that somewhere, somehow, Keith McBain's fears would prove to be groundless. Cherry was cheerful, even hopeful, though none knew whether her high spirits were genuine or feigned. She drew some comfort, at least, from the knowledge that, if McCartney had a card to play, so had she—and she would play it when the moment was most opportune.

But to all this McCartney was apparently blind. He had one desire, one aim so single and so unshakeable that he could see nothing else. His mind was bent upon winning the game at all costs—or, losing it, to work such havoc in the place that no one would stay. It was all a bit of frontier politics, with all the ruthlessness and much of the intrigue and petty conspiracy that mark the game of politics as it was played, just over the hills, in the well-dressed, highly organized society that these men had left in the hope of gaining a new freedom from the restraints of their old life.

Sooner or later the break was bound to come—and McCartney had timed it to suit his own convenience. Saturday morning Tom Rickard turned out with the men as usual, and drove the team he had been driving all week. King had left the scene of operations and had walked slowly down the narrow trail worn by the logs that had been dragged out of the woods during the week. He had gone a little more than half way towards the point where the trail branched off in several directions at once and lost itself in the woods. Rickard and a companion were just emerging from the cover of the trees, bringing out two bits of timber bound together at one end with a heavy logging chain. Suddenly Rickard's team stopped with a jerk. The logs had slipped into an awkward position, wedged between two stout poplars that held them as in a vice.

King came up to them and looked for a moment at the muddle without speaking. Had Rickard showed the slightest good judgment he would never have allowed himself to get into the tangle. King knew that—but he stopped the words that were on his lips. Turning to Rickard's companion he directed him to make use of his cant-hook and dislodge the timbers. His request was made in a quiet tone and without anything offensive in his manner, and he stepped away from the men and started round to the other side of the horses to watch the work.

As he did so he heard Rickard muttering something that was meant for his companion, though he did not conceal the fact that he cared very little whether King heard it or not.

King stopped and came back.

"Just now, Rickard, this is a one man's job," he said. "You get that straight."

Rickard's mouth curled up into a sneer. He seemed on the point of making a reply, but he looked at King's face and shrugged his shoulders contemptuously without speaking.

King then turned to Rickard's companion and stood by until the logs were cleared. Then he gave Rickard orders to go ahead. Letting loose a string of oaths, Rickard struck the horses with the knotted ends of the lines, and continued lashing them as he drove them at a mad pace down the trail and round the corner to where the men were working.

King stood in the trail and watched Rickard abusing his team until the blood was hot in his veins. He made a quick start to overtake him—and then suddenly checked himself. Stepping back a little among the trees he waited.

In a few minutes Rickard returned for another load. King waited until he came opposite him in the trail, and then stepped out. Rickard's companion had not come back as yet and he was alone.

"Whoa!" King said to the horses, and he stepped before them in the trail.

Then he faced Rickard.

"Tie up here a minute," he said, indicating with his hand a tree conveniently near, to which the team could be made secure.

Rickard looked at King quickly and again gave a shrug of contempt.

"Rickard," King said, "that won't get you anywhere. Tie up—here!"

"I will—like—"

Rickard never finished his sentence. King was beside him with one step and had seized him by the shoulder.

"Rickard!" he said, sharply.

Rickard looked at him for a moment, and then going to the heads of the horses, led his team over to the tree and made them fast.

"Go in there," King commanded, and pointed into the woods in the direction of the river.

Rickard did not turn to look this time, but picked his way through the underbrush, with King close at his heels. When they came within a yard or two of the bank of the river King spoke again.

"This will do," he said. "I'm going to talk to you for about one minute, and I want you to listen."

All the quietness had vanished both from King's voice and from his manner. He was shaking with passion and his face was almost white. He laid one hand on Rickard's shoulder and closed his fingers in a vice-like grip.

"Ten minutes ago, Rickard," he said, "by God, I'd have killed you. Just now, you dirty whelp—I'll give you about thirty seconds to make up your mind to get

out. Leave that team where it is and get back out of the way till this job's done. If you're in town by Monday night I'll take my own way of putting you out. A little better than two days—that's enough time to square up and hit the trail. Are you ready?"

Rickard squirmed under King's hand, but King pulled him up suddenly.

"Are you ready?" he repeated.

Rickard nodded.

"Then move!"

King waited until he had gone a few yards before he followed him. They had not retraced more than half the distance they had come when they heard a great splash in the river behind them. They turned at once and looked back. A large section of the river bank, undermined by the action of the water, had fallen and had taken away the very ground on which they had been standing only a moment before.

King paused in silent contemplation of how petty, after all, are the things that vex us most. Only a moment did he allow his mind to wander from the business he had in hand; then he faced Rickard again, and without a word the two went off together.

King took the team back and gave it into the keeping of one of the men. He never left Rickard's side, however, until he had seen him safely away from the workers. Then he returned and went on with his work.

That evening the task was completed and King, after taking supper at Mac-Murray's and chatting a moment with Anne, walked over to Hurley's to talk with Cherry a little before he went to his shack. All day his mind had reverted time and time again to the incident with Rickard, and more especially to what seemed like a miraculous escape from what might have meant death to both. Now that the work was over and his mind was free, the whole affair came back upon him with renewed freshness. He told it all to Cherry and Mrs. Hurley, and when he had finished, Cherry, who had listened throughout without speaking a word, turned a serious face to King and put her hand upon his arm.

"It looks almost—as if God himself were helping us," she said.

She did not speak fervently, nor with any emotion. Her voice was quiet and her tone matter-of-fact. And yet King was struck by the simplicity of her manner. She evidently believed implicitly in what she had said—and King found himself impelled to share somewhat in her faith.

It was the last thought that lingered in his mind that night before he went to sleep to the sound of the rain falling upon the roof of his shack.

Hugh Hurley and Keith McBain sat together in the land office very late that

night. No one in town was in any mood for going to bed, and the sounds that came from Cheney's and MacMurray's bore ample evidence to the fact that the men were apparently preparing to make a night of it. Old Gabe Smith dropped in when it was very late and stayed long enough to observe, among other things, that if the rain didn't soon cease in the hills the water in the river would be over the top of the bank.

After Gabe had gone, the two men decided upon taking a walk down to the river to look at the rising water. What they saw when they got there struck fear into their hearts at once. Since it had grown dark the stream had risen a full foot, and was now rushing with terrific force around the bend, about the outer angle of which clustered the huts and cabins of the little town. Already the current had swept away large portions of the high bank, in which there was no rock or stone of any account to offer any resistance to the enormous weight of water that swept down like a vicious cataract out of the hills.

"Look yonder," Hurley said, suddenly.

Keith McBain turned to look in the direction indicated. Further up stream a little shack stood, with one corner already projecting over the edge of the bank. In a few hours at most the ground upon which it stood would be swept away and the shack with it.

Without losing a moment they hurried back to MacMurray's and called out the men who had not yet retired for the night. In less than five minutes, more than a score were at work, and before another half hour had passed, the shack had been moved back upon safe ground.

By the time the excitement was over there was not a man left in either MacMurray's or Cheney's. Everyone was out, either to help or look on. Keith McBain had left and gone back with Hurley to the office when the immediate danger was past. They were not in the crowd when Gabe Smith came running excitedly to the men to announce that the bank was falling away just above the place where the corral and equipment sheds had been built during the week.

At once the men hurried toward the corral. For a few minutes there was much excited and aimless running about on the part of the men, without any organization, and without any plan. Soon, however, there emerged certain unflinching indications that a part of the gang, at any rate, were under direction. Gabe Smith was probably the first to observe it, and his suspicions were confirmed when he saw McCartney's huge frame moving among the men. There was organization, but designed to frustrate all efforts to save the buildings, rather than to assist.

Gabe left the crowd of men, who were already wrangling among themselves, and hurried to find Keith McBain. He had his hand upon the door of the office and was about to open it, when he felt himself seized by the shoulder and

hurled back so violently that he stumbled and fell to the ground.

He looked up and saw McCartney standing over him.

"Stay out of the way, you old crust," McCartney said, "an' you won't get hurt."

In a moment the office door was opened and Hurley was standing in the lighted doorway, with McBain behind him.

"What's wrong?" demanded Hurley.

For reply McCartney stepped into the office, pushing Hurley before him, and closed the door behind him.

"This ain't an old man's town—that's what's wrong," he said.

Hurley expressed his astonishment.

"Well, but—an old man can live here as well as anywhere else, can't he?" he protested.

"All depends," McCartney replied, smiling cynically. "We'll settle that some other time. Just now I have business with Keith McBain."

"It's time to settle," he said, looking at McBain who, for a moment, seemed beaten in the struggle that was raging within him.

Suddenly he stood up and looked at McCartney, his eyes burning with the fierce hate that was in his soul. When he spoke his voice seemed a little uncertain, as if he were struggling to keep back the tears from his eyes. But almost immediately he mastered himself and spoke deliberately enough, if not quietly.

"What is it, McCartney?" he asked.

"Gabe Smith was here to announce to you that the new buildings an' the outfit is all goin' down stream before daybreak unless they're moved," McCartney replied.

"And is nothing going to be done?" asked McBain.

"That's just what I'm here for," returned McCartney. "It'll be done if you're ready to come through."

"Well—what will settle it?" Keith McBain asked in a voice that had almost a touch of weariness in it.

"We've talked about all that before—there's no change," McCartney replied.

Hurley looked from one man to the other in bewilderment.

"And if I refuse?" asked McBain.

"You're wastin' time," McCartney snapped.

Keith McBain raised his voice a little, but spoke with much the same deliberateness as before.

"For two years, McCartney, I've been in hell expecting this time to arrive any day. I'm past that now. I've settled it—and I'm going to see it to the end. Don't think you can frighten me—I'm old, but—I'll pay."

The words seemed to strike McCartney almost dumb.

"You'll pay?" he asked.

"Yes—go ahead—tell all you know!"

"By God, then, you will pay," McCartney exclaimed, and throwing the door open, went out.

Hurley stepped over and, closing the door, turned to McBain.

"What is this—this bargain, Keith?" he asked.

"For two years he has kept a secret that has held me bound to him—because I have been afraid to die."

"Die?" Hurley exclaimed.

"Hugh—I have killed a man."

For a moment they stood in silence and did not look at each other. Then Keith McBain moved wearily towards the door. Before he went out he turned and looked back at Hurley.

"Hugh," he said, quietly, "look after the men—I'm going to the girl."

Then he opened the door slowly and went out.

McCartney stood alone in the darkness by the river and waited for Rickard, whose form was faintly visible a few yards up the river. When Rickard had joined him, McCartney caught him by the arm.

"Well?" he asked.

"All smooth," Rickard replied.

"Nothin' rough?" McCartney prompted.

"I said—all smooth," Rickard returned, a little impatiently.

They walked together to within a few yards of the men and stood looking at them. McCartney's group were in the majority, and stood near the corral. Some distance back the others stood about in small groups, talking angrily among themselves.

A bit of the bank dropped away and fell with a dull splash into the water.

McCartney put a cigarette into his mouth and applied a match leisurely.

"I ain't much on religion, Rick," he said, jocularly, "but the Almighty sure looks friendly to-night."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

King awoke with a start. He had been sleeping very soundly, and at first, after he had opened his eyes, he had difficulty in bringing his senses to bear directly on what had disturbed him. The faint grey dawn was already at the window. Somewhere there had been a thumping and—the sound of a voice that, even to his sleep-fogged consciousness, was vaguely familiar.

For a moment he waited, sitting up in his bunk and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Suddenly the thumping was repeated—someone was at the door. Then he heard his name called and the sound of the voice brought him to his senses at once. It was the voice of Cherry McBain.

In an instant he was at the door.

"What's wrong?" he asked excitedly.

Cherry's voice was full of alarm. "Get dressed quickly, King," she replied. "We want you."

King hurried into his clothes, and going to the door again shot the wooden bar back from its socket and threw the door open. A very light drizzling rain was still falling, and Cherry shook the wet wrap from her head and shoulders as she stepped through the doorway. In his hurry King had not taken time to light the lamp, but even in the darkness he could see the expression of fear on her face. Without waiting to close the door he placed an arm about her shoulders and drew her towards him.

"Oh, King!" she cried, "it's come—it's come!"

He did not need to ask what had come. He knew. Leading her gently to a seat he left her, and sitting down on the edge of his bunk, drew on his boots and laced them hurriedly. Then he got up quickly and throwing on his coat, took his hat and turned to Cherry.

"All right—I'm ready," he announced.

Cherry got up from her seat and moved towards the door. She had not spoken while King was completing his preparations to go out, and he knew that she had been weeping silently.

When she got as far as the open doorway she paused and turned to him.

"King—King—" she began, but her voice failed her.

King stepped close to her and took her arm.

"Tell me about it as we go," he said.

She moved towards him, and reaching up placed her hands on his shoulders. King looked down at her face, white and tense in the darkness.

"You must fight, King," she said, with an emphasis that to King seemed almost pathetic.

He pressed her closer for reply.

"And you must win," she added.

He smiled faintly. "I'm ready," he said.

Her hands crept slowly about his neck, and King, with a suddenness that swept her off her feet, caught her to him and pressed a kiss upon her mouth, a kiss in which all the pent-up passion of weeks found expression at last.

When he released her he stood with his arms about her for a brief moment, trembling before her.

"I don't deserve it," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "I guess I'll never deserve that—but I wanted to win first—to win for you."

She leaned a little closer to him and then drew herself up and clung tightly with her arms about his neck.

"King," she said, breathlessly, "I love you—I love you!"

Again he put his lips to hers quickly, passionately—and then put her back from him.

"We must get along down now," he said.

Cherry drew her wrap around her and they went out together.

A few minutes' walking brought them within sight of the town, apparently peaceful in the cold grey glimmer of light just breaking in the east. So quiet was it that King began to wonder if the disturbances of which Cherry had been telling him as they came along had not been settled. Then suddenly there arose a shout from the further side of the town, near the river, and King quickened his pace almost to a run, giving Cherry all she could do to keep up. At last his eagerness mastered him, and leaving Cherry with a last warning to go back to Hurley's cottage and not to stir until he should come for her, he left her and went off at a run in the direction of the shouting.

What King saw when he reached the point in the street where it turned and ran along the bank of the river made him stand a moment aghast. Back against the trees the buildings stood, huddling together closely in the cold light of the early morning. The water in the river was almost level with the ground on which he was standing, and large sections of the bank had been swept away during the night, until the corral in which the horses were placed before King left town the night before, was now standing on the very brink of the flood.

This was in itself enough to strike fear into King's heart, but the movements of the men were what concerned him most. Half-drunken still from their night's debauch they seemed to be rolling about in a kind of ridiculous orgy, stumbling and falling and scrambling to their feet again, shouting and cursing and grappling each other in frenzied disorder.

A glance was enough for King to realize fully what was wrong. He could not see McCartney anywhere among the men, but Cherry had told him enough—if telling had been at all necessary. Back a little from the struggling mass stood six or eight men, looking on quietly and talking among themselves. King recognized them as some of his own men, upon whom he thought he could rely for support.

In a moment he was standing in the middle of the group.

"What are you standing here for?" he asked. "Come on—get into it!"

In a flash they were into the struggle, King leading them as they bored their way through in an effort to reach the corral. King's plan was clear in his own mind. Once with his back to the walls of the corral, he could call his men one by one about him, and having displaced their opponents, drive them off by united effort, break up their organization, and beat them into submission.

The plan, easily enough conceived, was not so easily carried into effect. King's appearance, it is true, had raised the spirits of the men who were fighting together to settle the scores they had accumulated during weeks of growing hatred for McCartney and his crowd. But as their spirits rose, the determination of their opponents became more grim as they saw themselves faced with possible defeat where they had never dreamed of anything but an easy victory. The fight became more and more furious every minute. Whereas before King's coming they had fought without much bad temper and with little evidence of losing control of themselves, now they struck out madly and grappled with the fierceness of men in a battle where life and death depended upon the outcome. They had fought only with their fists before. Now sticks and clubs began to make their appearance as if by magic, and in many cases the fight was for the possession of weapons.

Once King saw the flash of a knife between two men who were struggling near him. Turning quickly he struck the fellow who held it, sending him to the ground, where he sprawled clumsily in an effort to escape being trampled under the feet of the fighters. The knife had fallen to the ground, and King, placing his foot on it for a moment, waited while he beat back a struggling pair who were close to him. Then stooping quickly he picked up the knife and threw it into the river. No sooner had he thrown it away than the owner pushed his way towards King and accosted him for having attacked him. He was one of King's men.

King pushed him back angrily.

"Let them start that," he cried in a voice that rose above the din. "Get in there!"

He pointed to where a group of his men were now massed against their opponents and were driving them back slowly from the corral.

Then his eyes shifted suddenly in a new direction. Pushing his way through the crowd towards King, was McCartney, his huge shoulders towering above the other men, his dark face serious and totally divested of its usual cynical smile. Not far behind him, on the outskirts of the crowd, stood Old Silent.

King wasted no time on the men about him. If McCartney's anxiety to reach him were greater than his own, there was no indication of the fact in the eagerness with which King pressed towards him, pushing first one and then another

out of the way as he went forward.

When the two men faced each other at last they paused a moment, and their eyes met in a long look in which there was something more than mere hatred. In fact, an observer might have refused to believe that the look was one of hate. There was grim resolve and unwavering determination to settle an account of long standing. But, for a moment at least, there arose in King's heart a feeling of something like admiration for the embodiment of sheer brute strength that stood before him. King did not pause long enough to ask what lingered in the look McCartney gave him. He saw only that the tense seriousness that had darkened the face of McCartney was gradually giving place to the old sneer that had always played about one corner of his mouth—and the sight stung him to madness. He thought of Cherry McBain—he thought of the man whose life for two years had been one long curse to him—he thought of the woman who had died of a broken heart—and he stepped quickly and struck out at the sneering face before him.

The dawn in the east had spread upward from the horizon and filled the sky, still clouded, with a thin grey light. There was light enough, however, to make every movement easily discernible, and King watched his opponent from the beginning with an alertness that rendered him proof against any foul play. He was not going to be taken unawares, at any rate. If he were beaten it would be because he had matched himself against a better man.

Gradually the other men fell away from them and left the ground clear. McCartney's men had been driven back and were beaten. But friend and foe alike came round to watch what they rightly guessed was to be the last scene in a play that had been running for many weeks. Keith McBain himself stood off to one side, his face ashen white, his eyes set immovably upon the men who were settling once and for all, he hoped, not only their own accounts, but his as well. Old Gabe Smith stood directly behind King, calling out words of encouragement in his little piping voice, and totally oblivious to the existence of anyone else in the world.

For fully five minutes the two men walked cautiously about each other, striking out quickly but lightly, and stepping back immediately to recover themselves after each advance. Though the sneer never left McCartney's face, there was behind it a deep seriousness that expressed well the fact that he was fully conscious of the magnitude of the task before him. King's face was tense, set, terribly earnest.

Only once was there any interference from the bystanders. Mike Cheney, who had been an interested spectator during the whole struggle, pushed his way to the inner part of the circle of men and voiced a feeble protest. The men near him laughed and jostled him out of the way. He was content to remain where he was, though he no doubt felt there was something incongruous in the fact that

when he looked round he was standing next to Hugh Hurley.

After some time had passed in which the men had remained wholly on the defensive, McCartney began to advance persistently against King, who stepped back out of reach whenever he found McCartney pressing him too closely. King's wary tactics were testing the patience of his opponent. With an agility that was surprising in a man of his size, he stepped about the enclosure, keeping just out of reach of McCartney, and starting forward, snapping out his left hand when an opportunity presented itself. His blows were not heavy, but he was reaching McCartney's face and body almost every time he struck. McCartney swung and lunged heavily every time he struck at King, but his blows were without control.

Growing impatient at last with following King from place to place, he closed quickly and seized King about the body. This time, however, he had misjudged his man. As he came forward King stepped in and met him with a blow from the shoulder that struck McCartney on the chin. His full weight was behind the blow and McCartney's head went back from the force of it. Then his arms went round King and he hung on dazedly in an attempt to gain a little more time for recovery. But King was determined to make his recovery as difficult as possible. With McCartney's full weight bearing him down, he sent half a dozen quick, short blows to the body that made his opponent gasp for breath.

But McCartney kept his hold and tightened it, so that King found himself in a grip that made striking impossible. It was just this situation that King had tried to avoid. He knew McCartney's strength was probably more than a match for his own, and he had hoped that he might be able to keep him at a distance. As he felt the powerful arms closing more and more tightly about him he struggled to break the hold. After a few moments, however, he knew that his efforts were in vain. McCartney had him in a grip that reduced his effectiveness and made any attempt to break it simply a waste of reserve strength. He locked his arms about McCartney's shoulders and threw his whole weight upon him. His change of tactics was so sudden that McCartney staggered for a moment under his weight, and in that moment King's foot shot out suddenly and the two men went to the ground together, locked in each other's arms. Once, twice, three times, they rolled over, each attempting to gain the advantage of position without success. Then suddenly they broke apart and scrambled to their feet again, crouching at opposite sides of the circle.

For some seconds the men faced each other without attacking, both apparently taking advantage of even a brief breathing spell. Those who were anxious for McCartney's defeat began to express their impatience at King's failure to assume the aggressive. McCartney was plainly weakening under the punishment that King was inflicting. The fact that his aggressive tactics had not already brought the fight to an end had taken the heart out of McCartney. The face that

during the earlier stages of the struggle had borne a sneer was now painfully serious.

Even Hugh Hurley caught some of the excitement of the crowd as he saw that a well-directed aggressive on King's part would bring an end to the fight in a few minutes. Keith McBain's eyes were fixed upon King's face. Once or twice during the short lull in the struggle they exchanged glances. Keith McBain's heart sank within him, and he moved round to get closer to King. There was a look in King's eyes that he could not understand. When he found a place directly behind him he stepped in a little and put one hand on King's shoulder.

"Just a bit more, boy," he said, encouragingly. "He's nearly done."

King seemed on the point of turning his head to reply, but just then McCartney started towards him. This time King took a half step towards him and met the rush without attempting to step aside. Both men struck at the same moment, and both blows went home. McCartney's rush was checked, but the full force of his rush was behind the blow that caught King on the point of the chin. For a moment King was almost overcome by a sickening dizziness that set the world spinning about him. His mind went suddenly back to the night in McBain's camp when he had been hit on the head, and there started within him a terrible fear that the darkness that had overcome him then was creeping upon him now and blotting out his senses. For fully a minute—it seemed an hour—he fought to keep his eyes open and his attention centred on McCartney. He threw his weight against him blindly and gripped him in sheer desperation. Gradually his legs steadied under him and his sight cleared. Still he clung to his man.

Had McCartney had enough strength in reserve to deliver one more blow with any weight behind it, he could have finished the fight in another second. He knew as much himself, and he paused just a moment to muster what little strength he had left. Then he broke away suddenly and sent his right hand over as he stepped away. King's head went back and his arms went out before him helplessly.

His men shouted to him in that one sickening moment when the sense of utter defeat was forcing itself upon him. Hurley and McBain called his name frantically, but he seemed not to hear them. He sank to the ground on one knee, holding himself as erect as possible in a last effort to meet the rush that he knew was bound to come.

McCartney's men went wild with excitement. They called on him to bore in and finish it. Those behind stepped up and pushed him forward. When he didn't move they cursed him for a fool. But he stood swaying unsteadily, waiting, apparently, for King to fall to the ground.

Behind King there was a sudden commotion in the crowd. Gabe Smith's thin voice was giving commands to the men to make way for him. He pushed

his way to the front, leading behind him Cherry McBain.

"Fight—you—fight!" he cried at the top of his voice.

King glanced quickly about at the sound of Gabe's voice and his eyes fell upon Cherry's face. Her look was one of pathos and appeal—but she was smiling.

At once a change passed over King's countenance. Getting up he brushed his hand impatiently across his face and stepped towards McCartney. As he did so McCartney came forward and the two men met at the centre of the enclosure.

From that moment neither man gave an inch of ground. Fighting furiously at close quarters they seemed both to have gained sudden strength and renewed powers of endurance. There was little attempt at defense, each man trying to inflict as much punishment as possible upon his opponent, and caring little how much he received himself.

Fighting as they were, they could not hope to last much longer. The end came very suddenly. Stepping back quickly, King crouched a moment and waited for McCartney to advance. He had not a second to wait. When he saw him start he leaned far back and swung his right hand from his hip with all the strength he could command. The blow went straight and true, landing squarely on the side of McCartney's jaw, and the big foreman went down in a heap to the ground.

For a moment King stood above him—but the struggle was over. Then the sickening sensation returned suddenly. He turned to Cherry, who was now at his side.

"Take—me—away," he said, giving her his hand.

The next moment the arms of Hugh Hurley and Keith McBain were about him, and he staggered out of the crowd with Cherry and old Gabe leading the way before him.

It was not until they had gone some distance that they noticed King beginning to limp badly. At every step he took his face winced with pain. Finally he asked them to let him stand for a minute.

"It's my foot," he said, in answer to Hurley's question. "My ankle—something happened when we fell—just wait a little—it'll be all right in a minute."

After a moment's pause they started off again, but King found walking impossible. Keith McBain called a couple of men and they carried him to Hurley's cottage, where they laid him on a couch and left him in the care of Cherry and Mrs. Hurley.

McBain and Hurley went off at once to the scene of the early morning struggle. Gabe lingered a little while with King, busying himself with such odd jobs as Cherry and Mrs. Hurley found for him.

In a short time King had recovered sufficiently from the first ill-effects of his battle with McCartney to give some thought to what was going on outside.

He called Gabe to him.

"Have they gone back—McBain and Hurley?" he asked.

Gabe replied in the affirmative. "An' they'll handle it, too—don't you worry!" he added.

King thought seriously for a moment.

"Gabe," he said.

Gabe took the hand that King extended to him and waited.

"Get Anne—and bring her here," he said.

Gabe went out at once and King looked at Cherry, who was standing above him, her hand resting lightly upon his head.

"I want to tell Anne," he said quietly. "I want her to know I didn't want to do this. I want her to understand—it had to come."

"Then she told you, too?" Cherry asked.

King nodded in reply. Then he reached up and took her hand.

"Come down here beside me," he said, and his face was very serious.

Cherry knelt on the floor beside the couch.

"Cherry," he whispered, drawing her towards him, "I don't deserve it—but I want to kiss you."

She leaned forward and King's arms went round her as their lips met.

Keith McBain and his men went to work as if nothing had occurred for days to disturb the quiet, work-a-day life they had been living for months. Only one building was in imminent danger of being swept away by the flood, and in less than ten minutes after the close of the fight the men were busily engaged removing the camp equipment preparatory to taking the logs down and shifting the buildings back from the water's edge.

Gabe came upon the old contractor giving orders and directing the work in his customary way.

"Where is she?" asked Gabe, excitedly, as he came up with McBain.

"She—who?"

"Anne—she's gone!" Gabe replied.

McBain left the men and accompanied Gabe back to MacMurray's. They found McCartney lying on a bench where his men had placed him. Rickard was standing beside him talking with MacMurray.

"Where's the girl—Anne?" McBain asked MacMurray.

He replied by looking at McCartney and then at Rickard. McCartney turned and looked at McBain and then allowed his eyes to rest on Rickard.

"Rick," he said, "get her and bring her here. You can tell her I want her."

Rickard was gone less than ten minutes when he returned, preceded by Anne, who came quickly through the door and stopped suddenly before what

she saw.

She looked at the men standing about and then paused before Keith McBain. She did not ask the question, but McBain knew what was in her mind. His reply was brief.

"Howden," he said, and Anne's slow smile proved that she understood.

Then she went over to McCartney's side and looked down at him.

"You always were a damn fool," she said very deliberately, and very slowly—and her voice had a strangely deep note of pity in it.

Scattering the men before her, she hurried to the kitchen and came back with water in a basin and set about bathing McCartney's swollen face and washing the blood from his lips and chin. She was very silent and very gentle, and McCartney spoke no word to her as she worked over him.

The men looked on only for a moment and then went out one by one, until the two were left alone.

Later that morning Cherry went to MacMurray's to see if she could not prevail upon Anne to come over to Hurley's cottage to see King. She found Anne seated beside McCartney, who had fallen asleep. Anne was bending low over him, tears streaming down her cheeks. When she saw Cherry she got up quickly and brushed the tears impatiently from her eyes. Then she came to Cherry, where she was standing in the doorway.

"Anne—Anne," Cherry said, her voice soft with pity.

But Anne was mistress of herself now.

"How is King?" she asked, in a most matter-of-fact tone that expressed quite clearly how little she wanted anyone's sympathy.

"He's all right now," Cherry replied. "He has a bad ankle and can't walk, but it will be all right in a day or two. He asked me to bring you over."

"What does he want?"

Cherry found it hard to reply to Anne's question—it was asked with such cold directness.

"I think he wants to explain to you what he feels about—"

Anne stopped her abruptly. "Tell him it's all right. I ain't goin' to worry over a thing that I've been expectin' for weeks. Tell him it's all right."

Cherry turned to go.

"Wait a minute," Anne called, and vanished into the house.

She was gone a long time and Cherry waited patiently for her return. When she appeared again she held a folded paper in her hand and her hair was in disorder about her face.

"I had a time gettin' it," she said, coming towards Cherry and holding the paper before her. "I had to wake him up to tell me where it was. But he told me. One thing about Bill—he knows when he's beat—an' that's sayin' something for

a man that was never beat before—ain't it?"

She smiled comically, and Cherry could not help smiling at her in reply.

"Anyhow, here it is," she said, giving the paper to Cherry. "I thought of takin' it over myself—I like that boy—but you'd better give it to him."

Cherry knew little or nothing about official documents, but she could not help guessing the meaning of the paper she held in her hand. She opened it and glanced quickly over the written record of a timber claim in the hills, interjected between the lines of legally phrased printed matter.

"Take it to him," Anne continued after a pause. "He'll know what to do with it. If he don't—ask old man Hurley."

"But Anne—" Cherry protested, only to be interrupted again.

"Don't worry—I ain't stealin' it. Ain't I his wife?" she asked with a laugh. "Anyhow there's something else. I had a claim once out west—a good claim, too—never mind!"

She broke off abruptly and gave Cherry a little push.

"Give it to him an' tell him 'God bless him' for me," she added.

Cherry walked off slowly and Anne stood in the doorway watching her. When she had gone a few yards she stopped and came back.

"But father—" she began and paused awkwardly.

Anne's face took on a strange look. She stepped down from the doorway and confronted Cherry.

"Say—did Bill spring that man-killin' joke on Old Silent?" she asked.

Cherry nodded.

"Well, I'm blistered!" she exclaimed. "Leave it with me—I'll make him straighten that out himself."

And Cherry went off with a light heart.

That night Keith McBain came into the room where Cherry and King were sitting. King was preparing to leave for his shack—in spite of the protests of Mrs. Hurley—confident that he was able to get about and look after himself quite well with the help of old Gabe, who was going to stay with him. McBain came upon the two somewhat abruptly. When they looked up he was standing within a few feet of them, his old face beaming with a light that had not shone there for months.

"Cherry, girl," he said, coming towards her and holding his arms out to her, "it's all right!"

"What, father?" she asked, jumping up and going to him.

"McCartney lied—he has told me everything. The man is alive—Anne nursed him back—it's all right!"

Cherry threw her arms about her father's neck and kissed him.

"Father, father, father!" she cried; and suddenly her voice broke. "If we had only known."

"If we had only known!" repeated Old Silent; and his mind went back to a pile of stones and a little wooden cross that stood miles back beside, the right-of-way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

King dropped his scythe upon the windrow of freshly-cut hay and stood a moment while he wiped the sweat from his brow. It was July, and the day had been very hot, and King had cut a very wide swath in the tall, wild grass. A little way off on the higher ground of the ridge stood his first crop of growing wheat, the soft green shoots stretching upward from the new soil and bending before a gently moving breeze. Between the meadow and the wheat lay a stretch of newly-broken land where, only the day before, King had driven the plough through long furrows of rich mould. Even yet the mellow odor of freshly-turned soil came to him, mingled with the cool fragrance of the meadow.

King looked about him until his eyes fell upon Sal, where she was working half-buried in a hole she had dug in a futile attempt to follow a gopher to its place of hiding under the ground. He gave a sharp whistle and crouched low, holding out his hands as the dog came bounding towards him.

Taking her in his arms he lifted her from the ground and then rolled her over playfully on the hay.

Getting up, he strolled off along the edge of the standing grass, Sal running before him in a zig-zag search for gophers. When they came to the edge of a small slough the dog pounced at once into the water, almost on top of a wild duck and her brood of half-grown ducklings. They started up suddenly with much splashing of water and beating of wings and loud quacking.

"Back you—lie down!" King cried, and Sal retreated from the edge of the slough and came towards King wriggling and twisting her shaggy body in an effort to appear apologetic.

It was a great day, and now that the afternoon was wearing on, King was strongly tempted to be lazy. He had worked hard during the past weeks. The land he had prepared for crop had been sown broadcast by hand. He had cut

his hay with a scythe and would have to rake it by hand—though Cherry was longing for the hay to cure so that she could get into the field with King and rake the long windrows into coils.

Oh, yes—Cherry was King's helper now. One day in spring, just before the men had gone out to begin work on the railway construction again, there had been a final gathering from the whole valley. Cherry and King might have left it until midsummer. King wanted to get his land into shape and his first crop in—and Cherry wanted to see her father started once again on his right-of-way contracts. At least, so they said. The fact of the matter was that Old Silent wanted to keep his daughter by him for just a few weeks more, and King and Cherry had both agreed, to humor him a little until the work was well under way.

But the men had settled it. McCartney and his crowd—or such of them as felt themselves unable to face Keith McBain again—had withdrawn before the snow was on the ground. The season in the camps had been highly successful in every sense, a fact, by the way, that reflected much credit upon King Howden, who had handled the men and had taken the responsibility of conducting the camp during the winter. The work on the grade was waiting, and when the men went out to the right-of-way and the young settlers went to their land, The Town would be no more. There had not been a wedding in the place since the first hut had been built. The men—through a committee duly chosen and given full powers—made known to Keith McBain their feelings on the matter. For once the old contractor allowed himself to be persuaded against his will. He made only one condition, namely, that he himself should announce to King and Cherry the decision that The Town had come to. The men agreed, and withdrew from the presence of Old Silent to begin preparations for the great day.

And it had been a day for all to remember. King thought of it now as he walked back to where his scythe lay, and picking it up stood it on its haft while he applied his whet-stone to the blade, and sent the rhythmic tune of the hay-maker ringing across the meadow.

The Town was gone. There were a few old unfilled wells and the tumbled foundations of cabins, and a winding street grown over with grass and weeds—but that was all. Farther up the valley its ambitious successor was already thriving beside the right-of-way, waiting for the coming of the steel. Soon it would be linked up with the outside world, it would be given a name and placed on the map by someone who probably had never seen it—and the world's outer edge would have been pushed a little farther westward, and a little farther northward.

King tossed his stone aside upon the coat that lay on the hay near him, and taking his scythe in his hands, stepped forward and swung it through the grass.

From behind him came a clear call, and pausing at the end of his stroke he turned with a smile and waved his hand to Cherry, who was tripping along down

the meadow towards him. King dropped his scythe and went to meet her. When they met he caught her by the arms, and lifting her from the ground, kissed her on the lips.

"Leave the hay, King," she said, as soon as he had set her upon her feet again, "and let's go to the camp for supper. It's not four o'clock yet—we have more than two hours."

King glanced at the hay waiting to be put into coils and then at Cherry, whose face was full of fresh girlish expectancy. Her eyes were as roguish as they had been in those first days of their meeting, nearly a year ago.

She caught his sidelong glance and read its meaning at once.

"Ah, King," she pleaded, "it won't rain—see, there isn't a cloud in the sky! Besides—if it does—let it. There's lots and lots of hay—and there's only a little—just so much summer."

She pinched the end of a slender finger to give point to her last statement, and looked at King with a smile brightening in her eyes.

"You little scamp," he said, going to her and taking her head between his hands, "what's the use of a man making up his mind to anything where you are?"

He kissed her again and started towards the little cabin on the ridge, with Cherry dancing along beside him, clinging to his arm and chattering as she went.

When they came to the cabin they went in for a few moments to prepare for their trip. The cabin was larger and more comfortable than the shack in which King had lived during the previous summer—and infinitely cleaner. King had brought the logs from the hills during the winter, and had built the cabin with the assistance of a half dozen of Keith McBain's men. Cherry did the rest—and the place was as neat and snug as the heart could wish.

In a moment King was out again and was gone to the corral among the willows below the ridge. When he returned and stood before the door of the cabin he led the horses, saddled and bridled and champing their bits. King called and Cherry emerged ready for the road. Sal leaped about them until they had got into the saddles, and then all went off together.

Keith McBain's camp lay some twelve or fifteen miles up the valley to the north and west. With two hours to make the trip they had ample time, without much loitering, to reach camp before the men should leave the grade for supper. They followed the freighters' trail that wound in and out, now skirting the edge of the right-of-way, now heading into the standing poplars, or running out across open reaches of green plain. Before the summer's end the steel gang would have laid the rails and the first trains would have steamed into the valley from beyond the hills. Even now the gang of engineers and levellers were close upon the heels of the graders, giving the road-bed its final touches before the steel was laid.

Cherry and King rode along easily, without hurrying their horses, King

listening while Cherry did most of the talking. Here and there new beauties came to meet them in the curving trail and waving grass and tall white poplars with glistening leaves and white powdered trunks. They crossed a half-dozen little streams of clear water rippling over gravel and shale. Frequently they came out where they caught a distant view of the hills that lay to the north of the valley, pale blue and lying low upon the horizon, like a fringe of dark cloud. To-day they were a very pale blue, and Cherry smiled as she pointed to them and reminded King of what she had told him in the meadow.

"You see—it isn't going to rain for days," she said. "See how smoky the hills are."

King extended his hand and leaned towards her. The horses moved closer together in instinct born of training at the hands of practised riders, and King's arm went about Cherry as he drew her close to him.

He seemed about to speak, but kissed her instead.

The next moment they were off at a brisk run along a stretch of open trail.

It was not yet six o'clock when the trail took them out upon the right-of-way a scant half mile from where Keith McBain's men were still at work on the grade. King drew his horse in and stood for some time gazing down the open right-of-way towards the workers, and then turned to look behind him, where the grade stretched far into the distance and was lost in the closing perspective.

"I like this," he said to Cherry, who had drawn rein beside him. "There's something about it all that makes a man glad he has lived and taken some little part in it. If we could see the world in the making—I think it would be something like this."

He stretched out his arm and swept it about him as he spoke.

Cherry looked into his face, in contemplation, not so much of what he was saying but rather of what she saw in his eyes. All that made him a man—all that made him the man she loved—all that made him the man that men loved—was there in the simple gravity and the deep seriousness of his face.

A few moments later they rode down among the men to where Keith McBain was standing alone smoking his pipe and watching a line of teamsters swinging about, an endless chain of "slushers" moving the earth from the side of the right-of-way to the grade in the middle. They were met on all sides by greetings from the men, who paused in their work to give them a welcome.

When they came to Keith McBain, Cherry sprang to the ground and kissed her father, and King, swinging down from the saddle, came forward and shook hands with the old contractor. In Keith McBain's eyes there was a light as of returning youth. The smile on his face was the smile of a man who had found the world a good place to live in, after all, and wants nothing more than to be left to do his work and fill his remaining days with achievement.

There was almost a half hour still left before six o'clock, but Cherry went close to her father and patted his cheeks with her two hands.

"Let's all quit work for the day," she said. "I don't come to camp often."

Old Silent looked at her with all the pretense at being stern that he could command in the presence of his daughter.

"Who's going to build this railroad?" he asked, a smile growing upon his features.

Cherry kissed her father and patted his cheeks playfully again. "Old Silent is," she said; "but his daughter, Cherry McBain, is going to make his men glad she came. She's going to make them want her back again."

"You buy your popularity at a very high price," he replied.

"Remember—I have a husband who does as I tell him," Cherry returned. "If you don't call the men in—I'll tell him to do it."

Keith McBain looked at King and then put his arm about his daughter. The look carried a meaning, and King turned towards the men and gave the call.

"All in!"

The men responded as if they had been expecting the call, and almost at once the works were deserted and the men were trooping off in the direction of the camp. The little group of three were the last to leave the grade. They lingered a long time talking and looking over the work the men had done during the day. Then they walked off together, King and Cherry on either side of the old man, the two horses following behind them with the bridle-reins hanging across their necks, Sal leisurely bringing up the rear.

"And won't you be leaving this work soon and coming to stay with us?" King asked of Keith McBain when they had come almost to the camp.

"What—leave this and go puttering round on a farm?" he replied. "No, boy, no. As long as I can give the call to 'roll out' in the mornings I'll stay with it. When I'm through—I'll quit here—with my men!"

The remainder of the walk to camp was made in silence.

There was a big dinner that evening that lasted long after the usual hour. And there was much talking and laughing and some singing of songs at the table. All ate together, with a place at the centre of one long table for Cherry, where she could see all the men from where she sat. On one side of her sat her father, and on the other side her husband. And when it was all over the men gave cheers, first for Cherry McBain, and then for the man who was the father of Cherry McBain, and last of all for the man who had played the game and had won the heart of Cherry McBain.

And late that evening King and Cherry took the trail again to return home. And the men gathered to cheer once more until they were gone from sight.

Then came upon them the silence of the evening and the magic of it. In

the west was the dying flame of a day that had set. About them lay the woods and the grassy reaches of plain, with a deep hush upon them broken only by the occasional sleepy twitter of birds, or the lazy croaking of frogs in the hollows, or the sharp whistle of night-hawks that swept down above them on whirring wings. And from far away there came the sound of someone singing in the night.

THE END.

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE HEART OF CHERRY
MCBAIN ***

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