

Cullum Ridgwell

The Trail of the Axe: A Story of Red Sand Valley



Ridgwell Cullum

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CHAPTER I

DAVE

Dave was thirty-two, but looked forty; for, in moulding his great, strong, ugly face, Nature had been less than kind to him. It is probable, from his earliest, Dave had never looked less than ten years older than he really was.

Observing him closely, one had the impression that Nature had set herself the task of equipping him for a tremendous struggle in the battle of life; as though she had determined to make him invincible. Presuming this to have been her purpose, she set to work with a liberal hand. She gave him a big heart, doubtless wishing him to be strong to fight and of a great courage, yet with a wonderful sympathy for the beaten foe. She gave him the thews and sinews of a Hercules, probably arguing that a man must possess a mighty strength with which to carry himself to victory. To give him such physical strength it was necessary to provide a body in keeping. Thus, his shoulders were abnormally wide, his chest was of a mighty girth, his arms were of phenomenal length, and his legs were gnarled and knotted with muscles which could never be satisfactorily disguised by the class of "store" clothes it was his frugal custom to wear.

For his head Nature gave him a fine, keen brain; strong, practical, subtly far-seeing in matters commercial, bluntly honest and temperate, yet withal matching his big heart in kindly sympathy. It was thrilling with a vast energy and capacity for work, but so pronounced was its dominating force, that in the development of his physical features it completely destroyed all delicacy of mould and gentleness of expression. He displayed to the world the hard, rugged face of the fighter, without any softening, unless, perhaps, one paused to look into the depths of his deep-set gray eyes.

Nature undoubtedly fulfilled her purpose. Dave was equipped as few men are equipped, and if it were to be regretted that his architect had forgotten that even a fighting man has his gentler moments, and that there are certain requirements in his construction to suit him to such moments, in all other respects he had been treated lavishly. Summed up briefly, Dave was a tower of physical might, with a face of striking plainness.

It was twelve years since he came to the Red Sand Valley. He was then fresh from the lumber regions of Puget Sound, on the western coast of the United States. He came to Western Canada in search of a country to make his own, with a small capital and a large faith in himself, supported by a courage that did not know the meaning of defeat.

He found the Red Sand Valley nestling in the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains. He saw the wonders of the magnificent pine woods which covered the mountain slopes in an endless sea of deep, sombre green. And he knew that these wonderful primordial wastes were only waiting for the axe of the woodsman to yield a building lumber second to none in the world.

The valley offered him everything he needed. A river that flowed in full tide all the open season, with possibilities of almost limitless "timber booms" in its backwaters, a delicious setting for a village, with the pick of a dozen adequate sites for the building of lumber mills. He could hope to find nothing better, so he stayed.

His beginning was humble. He started with a horse-power saw-pit, and a few men up in the hills cutting for him. But he had begun his great struggle with fortune, and, in a man such as Nature

had made him, it was a struggle that could only end with his life. The battle was tremendous, but he never hesitated, he never flinched.

Small as was his beginning, six years later his present great mills and the village of Malkern had begun to take shape. Then, a year later, the result of his own persistent representation, the Canadian Northwestern Railroad built a branch line to his valley. And so, in seven years, his success was practically assured.

Now he was comfortably prosperous. The village was prosperous. But none knew better than he how much still remained to be achieved before the foundations of his little world were adequate to support the weight of the vast edifice of commercial enterprise, which, with his own two hands, his own keen brain, he hoped to erect.

He was an American business man raised in the commercial faith of his country. He understood the value of "monopoly," and he made for it. Thus, when he could ill spare capital, by dint of heavy borrowings he purchased all the land he required, and the "lumbering" rights of that vast region.

Then it was that he extended operations. He abandoned his first mill and began the building of his larger enterprise further down the valley, at a point where he had decided that the village of Malkern should also begin its growth.

Once the new mill was safely established he sold his old one to a man who had worked with him from the start. The transaction was more in the nature of a gift to an old friend and comrade. The price was nominal, but the agreement was binding that the mill should only be used for the production of small building material, and under no circumstances to be used in the production of rough "baulks." This was to protect his own monopoly in that class of manufacture.

George Truscott, the lumberman with whom he made the transaction, worked the old mills with qualified success for two years. Then he died suddenly of blood-poisoning, supervening upon a badly mutilated arm torn by one of his own saws. The mill automatically became the property of his only son Jim, a youth of eighteen, curly-headed, bright, lovable, but wholly irresponsible for such an up-hill fight as the conduct of the business his father had left him.

The master of the Malkern mills, as might be expected, was a man of simple habits and frugal tastes. In his early struggles he had had neither time nor money with which to indulge himself, and the habit of simple living had grown upon him. He required so very little. He had no luxurious home; a mere cottage of four rooms and a kitchen, over which an aged and doting mother ruled, her establishment consisting of one small maid. His office was a shack of two rooms, bare but useful, containing one chair and one desk, and anything he desired to find a temporary safe resting-place for strewn about the floor, or hung upon nails driven into the walls. It was all he needed, a roof to shade him from the blazing summer sun when he was making up his books, and four walls to shut out the cruel blasts of the Canadian winter.

He was sitting at his desk now, poring over a heap of letters which had just arrived by the Eastern mail. This was the sort of thing he detested. Correspondence entailed a lot of writing, and he hated writing. Figures he could cope with, he had no grudge against them, but composing letters was a task for which he did not feel himself adequately equipped; words did not flow easily from his pen. His education was rather the education of a man who goes through the world with ears and eyes wide open. He had a wide knowledge of men and things, but the inside of books was a realm into which he had not deeply delved.

At last he pushed his letters aside and sat back, his complaining chair protesting loudly at the burden imposed upon it. He drew an impatient sigh, and began to fill his pipe, gazing through the rain-stained window under which his untidy desk stood. He had made up his mind to leave the answering of his letters until later in the day, and the decision brought him some relief.

He reached for the matches. But suddenly he altered his mind and removed his pipe from his mouth. A smile shone in his deep-set eyes at the sight of a dainty, white figure which had just emerged from behind a big stack of milled timber out in the yard and was hurrying toward the office.

He needed no second glance to tell him who the figure belonged to. It was Betty – little Betty Somers, as he loved to call her – who taught the extreme youth of Malkern out of her twenty-two years of erudition and worldly wisdom.

He sprang from his chair and went to the door to meet her, and as he walked his great bulk and vast muscle gave his gait something of the roll of a sailor. He had no lightness, no grace in his movements; just the ponderous slowness of monumental strength. He stood awaiting her in the doorway, which he almost filled up.

Betty was not short, but he towered above her as she came up, his six feet five inches making nothing of her five feet six.

"This is bully," he cried delightedly, as she stood before him. "I hadn't a notion you were getting around this morning, Betty."

His voice was as unwieldy as his figure; it was husky too, in the manner of powerful voices when their owners attempt to moderate them. The girl laughed frankly up into his face.

"I'm playing truant," she explained. Then her pretty lips twisted wryly, and she pointed at the lintel of the door. "Please sit down there," she commanded. Then she laughed again. "I want to talk to you, and – and I have no desire to dislocate my neck."

He made her feel so absurdly small; she was never comfortable unless he was sitting down.

The man grinned humorously at her imperious tone, and sat down. They were great friends, these two. Betty looked upon him as a very dear, big, ugly brother to whom she could always carry all her little worries and troubles, and ever be sure of a sympathetic adviser. It never occurred to her that Dave could be anything dearer to anybody. He was just Dave – dear old Dave, an appellation which seemed to fit him exactly.

The thought of him as a lover was quite impossible. It never entered her head. Probably the only people in Malkern who ever considered the possibility of Dave as a lover were his own mother, and perhaps Mrs. Tom Chepstow. But then they were wiser than most of the women of the village. Besides, doubtless his mother was prejudiced, and Mrs. Tom, in her capacity as the wife of the Rev. Tom Chepstow, made it her business to study the members of her husband's parish more carefully than the other women did. But to the ordinary observer he certainly did not suggest the lover. He was so strong, so cumbersome, so unromantic. Then his ways were so deliberate, so machine-like. It almost seemed as though he had taken to himself something of the harsh precision of his own mills.

On the other hand, his regard for Betty was a matter of less certainty. Good comradeship was the note he always struck in their intercourse, but oftentimes there would creep into his gray eyes a look which spoke of a warmth of feeling only held under because his good sense warned him of the utter hopelessness of it. He was too painfully aware of the quality of Betty's regard for him to permit himself any false hopes.

Betty's brown eyes took on a smiling look of reproach as she held up a warning finger.

"Dave," she said, with mock severity, "I always have to remind you of our compact. I insist that you sit down when I am talking to you. I refuse to be made to feel – and look – small. Now light your pipe and listen to me."

"Go ahead," he grinned, striking a match. His plain features literally shone with delight at her presence there. Her small oval, sun-tanned face was so bright, so full of animation, so healthy looking. There was such a delightful frankness about her. Her figure, perfectly rounded, was slim and athletic, and her every movement suggested the open air and perfect health.

"Well, it's this way," she began, seating herself on the corner of a pile of timber: "I'm out on the war-path. I want scalps. My pocketbook is empty and needs filling, and when that's done I'll get back to my school children, on whose behalf I am out hunting."

"It's your picnic?" suggested Dave.

"Not mine. The kiddies'. So now, old boy, put up your hands! It's your money or your life." And she sat threatening him with her pocketbook, pointing it at him as though it were a pistol.

Dave removed his pipe.

"Guess you'd best have 'em both," he smiled.

But Betty shook her head with a joyous laugh.

"I only want your money," she said, extending an open hand toward him.

Dave thrust deep into his hip-pocket, and produced a roll of bills.

"It's mostly that way," he murmured, counting them out.

But his words had reached the girl, and her laugh died suddenly.

"Oh, Dave!" she said reproachfully.

And the man's contrition set him blundering.

"Say, Betty, I'm a fool man anyway. Don't take any sort of notice. I didn't mean a thing. Now here's fifty, and you can have any more you need."

He looked straight into her eyes, which at once responded to his anxious smile. But she did not attempt to take the money. She shook her head.

"Too much."

But he pushed the bills into her hand.

"You can't refuse," he said. "You see, it's for the kiddies. It isn't just for you."

When Dave insisted refusal was useless. Betty had long since learned that. Besides, as he said, it was for the "kiddies." She took the money, and he sat and watched her as she folded the bills into her pocketbook. The girl looked up at the sound of a short laugh.

"What's that for?" she demanded, her brown eyes seriously inquiring.

"Oh, just nothing. I was thinking."

The man glanced slowly about him. He looked up at the brilliant summer sun. Then his eyes rested upon the rough exterior of his unpretentious office.

"It meant something," asserted Betty. "I hate people to laugh – in that way."

"I was thinking of this shack of mine. I was just thinking, Betty, what a heap of difference an elegant coat of paint makes to things. You see, they're just the same underneath, but they – kind of look different with paint on 'em, kind of please the eye more."

"Just so," the girl nodded wisely. "And so you laughed – in that way."

Dave's eyes twinkled.

"You're too sharp," he said. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

"Now about this picnic. You're expecting all the grown folk?"

The girl's eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Of course I do. Don't you always come? It's only once a year." The last was very like a reproach.

The man avoided her eyes. He was looking out across the sea of stacked timber at the great sheds beyond, where the saws were shrieking out their incessant song.

"I was thinking," he began awkwardly, "that I'm not much good at those things. Of course I guess I can hand pie round to the folks; any fellow can do that. But –"

"But what?" The girl had risen from her seat and was trying to compel his gaze.

"Well, you see, we're busy here – desperately busy. Dawson's always grumbling that we're short-handed –"

Betty came up close to him, and he suddenly felt a gentle squeeze on his shoulder.

"You don't want to come," she said.

"'Tisn't that – not exactly."

He kept his eyes turned from her.

"You see," he went on, "you'll have such a heap of folk there. They mostly all get around – for you. Then there'll be Jim Truscott, and Jim's worth a dozen of me when it comes to picnics and 'sociables' and such-like."

The girl's hand suddenly dropped from his shoulder, and she turned away. A flush slowly mounted to her sun-tanned cheeks, and she was angry at it. She stood looking out at the mills beyond, but she wasn't thinking of them.

At last she turned back to her friend and her soft eyes searched his.

"If – if you don't come to the picnic to-morrow, I'll never forgive you, Dave – never!"

And she was gone before his slow tongue could frame a further excuse.

CHAPTER II

A PICNIC IN THE RED SAND VALLEY

Summer, at the foot of the Canadian Rockies, sets in suddenly. There are no dreary days of damp and cold when the east wind bites through to the bones and chills right down to the marrow. One moment all is black, dead; the lean branches and dead grass of last year make a waste of dreary decay. Watch. See the magic of the change. The black of the trees gives way to a warming brown; the grass, so sad in its depression, suddenly lightens with the palest hue of green. There is at once a warmth of tone which spreads itself over the world, and gladdens the heart and sets the pulses throbbing with renewed life and hope. Animal life stirs; the insect world rouses. At the sun's first smile the whole earth awakens; it yawns and stretches itself; it blinks and rubs its eyes, and presently it smiles back. The smile broadens into a laugh, and lo! it is summer, with all the world clad in festal raiment, gorgeous in its myriads of changing color-harmonies.

It was on such a day in the smiling valley of the Red Sand River that Betty Somers held her school picnic. There were no shadows to mar the festivities she had arranged. The sky was brilliant, cloudless, and early in the season as it was, the earth was already beginning to crack and parch under the fiery sun.

A dozen democrat wagons, bedecked with flags and filled to overflowing with smiling, rosy-faced children, each wagon under the charge of one of the village matrons, set out at eight o'clock in the morning for the camping-ground. Besides these, an hour later, a large number of private buggies conveyed the parents and provender, while the young people of the village rode out on horseback as a sort of escort to the commissariat. It was a gay throng, and there could be little doubt but that the older folk were as delighted at the prospect of the outing as the children themselves.

Dave was there with the rest. Betty's challenge had had its effect. But he came without any of the enthusiasm of the rest of the young people. It was perfectly true that the demands of his mill made the outing inconvenient to him, but that was not the real reason of his reluctance. There was another, a far stronger one. All the years of his manhood had taught him that there was small place for him where the youth of both sexes foregathered. His body was too cumbersome, his tongue was too slow, and his face was too plain. The dalliance of man and maid was not for him, he knew, and did he ever doubt or forget it, his looking-glass, like an evil spirit, was ever ready to remind and convince him.

The picnic ground was some five miles down the valley, in the depths of a wide, forest-grown glen, through which a tiny tributary of the Red Sand River tumbled its way over a series of miniature waterfalls. The place was large and magnificently rock-bound, and looked as though it had originally been chiseled by Nature to accommodate a rushing mountain torrent. It gave one the impression of a long disused waterway which, profiting by its original purpose, had become so wonderfully fertilized that its vegetation had grown out of all proportion to its capacity. It was a veritable jungle of undergrowth and forest, so dense and wide spreading as almost to shut out the dazzling sunlight. It was an ideal pleasure camping-ground, where the children could romp and play every game known to the Western child, and their elders could revel in the old, old game which never palls, and which the practice of centuries can never rob of its youth.

All the morning the children played, while the women were kept busy with the preparations for the midday feast. The men were divided up into two sections, the elders, taking office under the command of Tom Chepstow, organizing the children's games, and the other half, acknowledging the leadership of Mrs. Tom, assisting those engaged in the culinary arrangements.

As might be expected, the latter occupation found most favor with the younger men. There was far more fun in wandering through the tangled undergrowth of the riverside to help a girl fill

a kettle, than in racking one's brains for some startlingly unoriginal and long-forgotten game with which to dazzle the mind of Malkern's youth. Then there were the joys of gathering fire-wood, a task which enlisted the services of at least a dozen couples. This was a much favored occupation. There was no time limit, and it involved a long, long ramble. Then, too, it was remarkable that every girl performing the simplest duty, and one in which she never required the least assistance when at home, found it quite impossible to do so here without the strong physical and moral support of the man she most favored.

Thus the morning passed. While the girls and men flirted, and the older women took to themselves a reflected enjoyment of it all, the children shrieked their delight at the simplest game, and baited their elders with all the impudence of childhood. It was a morning of delight to all; a morning when the sluggish blood of the oldest quickened in the sunken veins; a morning when the joy of living was uppermost, and all care was thrust into the background.

It was not until after dinner that Dave saw anything of Betty. As he had anticipated, Jim Truscott never left her side, and his own morning had been spent with Tom Chepstow and the children. Then, at dinner, it had fallen to his lot to assist the matrons in waiting upon the same riotous horde. In consequence, by the time he got his own meal, Betty and the younger section of the helpers had finished theirs and were wandering off into the woods.

After dinner he sought out a secluded spot in which to smoke and – make the best of things. He felt he had earned a rest. His way took him along the bank of the little tumbling river. It was delightfully restful, cool and shadowed by the overhanging trees that nearly met across it. It was not an easy path, but it was calmly beautiful and remote, and that was all he sought.

Just above one rapid, something larger than the others he had passed, he came to a little log footbridge. It was a delicious spot, and he sat down and filled his pipe. The murmur of the rapids below came up to him pleasantly. All the foliage about him was of that tender green inspired by the humidity of the dank, river atmosphere. Here and there the sun broke through in patches and lit up the scene, and added beauty to the remoter shadows of the woods. It was all so peaceful. Even the distant voices of the children seemed to add to the calm of his retreat.

His pipe was nearly finished, and an insidious languor was stealing over him. He nodded once or twice, almost asleep. Then he started wide awake; a familiar laughing voice sounded just behind him, calling him by name.

"Oh, Dave! So this is where you are! I've been hunting for you till – till my feet are sore."

Before he could move Betty had plumped herself down beside him on the bridge. He was wide enough awake now, and his delight at the girl's presence was so apparent that she promptly and frankly remarked upon it.

"I do believe you're glad I came, and – woke you up," she laughed.

The man leant back luxuriously and propped himself against the post of the hand-rail.

"I am, surely," he said with conviction. "I've been thinking about picnics. It seems to me they're a heap of fun –"

"So you stole away by yourself to enjoy this one."

Betty's brown eyes glanced slyly at him. There was a half smile in them, and yet they were serious. Dave began to refill his pipe.

"Well, Betty, you see I just thought I'd like a smoke. I've been with the kiddies all morning."

Suddenly the girl sat round facing him.

"Dave, I'm a little beast. I oughtn't to have made you come. I know you don't care for this sort of thing, only – well, you are so kind, and you are so fond of making people happy. And you – you – Oh, Dave, I – I want to tell you something. That's – that's why I was hunting for you."

She had turned from him, and was gazing out down the stream now. Her face was flushed a deep scarlet. For an instant she had encountered his steady gray eyes and her confusion had been complete. She felt as though he had read right down into her very soul.

Dave put his pipe away. The serious expression of his rugged face was unchanged, but the smile in his eyes had suddenly become more pronounced.

"So that's why you hunted me out?" he said gently. "Well, Betty, you can tell me."

He had seen the blushing face. He had noted the embarrassment and hesitancy, and the final desperate plunge. He knew in his heart what was coming, and the pain of that knowledge was so acute that he could almost have cried out. Yet he sat there waiting, his eyes smiling, his face calmly grave as it always was.

For nearly a minute neither spoke. Then the man's deep voice urged the girl.

"Well?"

Betty rested her face in her hands and propped her elbows on her knees. All her embarrassment had gone now. She was thinking, thinking, and when at last her words came that tone of excitement which she had used just a moment before had quite gone out of her voice.

"It's Jim," she said quietly. "He's asked me to marry him. I've promised – and – and he's gone to speak to uncle."

Dave took out his pipe again and looked into the bowl of it.

"I guessed it was that," he said, after a while. Then he fumbled for his tobacco. "And – are you happy – little Betty?" he asked a moment later.

"Yes – I – I think so."

"You think so?"

Dave was astonished out of himself.

"You only think so?" he went on, his breath coming quickly.

Betty sat quite still and the man watched her, with his pipe and tobacco gripped tightly in his great hand. He was struggling with a mad desire to crush this girl to his heart and defy any one to take her from him. It was a terrible moment. But the wild impulse died down. He took a deep breath and – slowly filled his pipe.

"Tell me," he said, and his tone was very tender.

The girl turned to him. She rested an arm on his bent knee and looked up into his face. There was no longer any hesitation or doubt. She was pale under the warm tanning of her cheeks, but she was very pretty, and, to Dave, wildly seductive as she thus appealed to him.

"Oh, Dave, I must tell you all. You are my only real friend. You, I know, will understand, and can help me. If I went to uncle, good and kind as he is, I feel he would not understand. And auntie, she is so matter-of-fact and practical. But you – you are different from anybody else."

The man nodded.

"I have loved Jim for so long," she went on hurriedly. "Long – long before he ever even noticed me. To me he has always been everything a man should and could be. You see, he is so kind and thoughtful, so brave, so masterful, so – so handsome, with just that dash of recklessness which makes him so fascinating to a girl. I have watched him pay attention to other girls, and night after night I have cried myself to sleep about it. Dave, you have never known what it is to love anybody, so all this may seem silly to you, but I only want to show you how much I have always cared for Jim. Well, after a long time he began to take notice of me. I remember it so well," she went on, with a far-away look in her eyes. "It was a year ago, at our Church Social. He spent a lot of time with me there, and gave me a box of candy, and then asked permission to see me home. Dave, from that moment I was in a seventh heaven of happiness. Every day I have felt and hoped that he would ask me to be his wife. I have longed for it, prayed for it, dreaded it, and lived in a dream of happiness. And now he has asked me."

She turned away to the bustling stream. Her eyes had become pathetically sad.

"And – " Dave prompted her.

"Oh, I don't know." She shook her head a little helplessly. "It all seems different now."

"Different?"

"Yes, that wildly happy feeling has gone."

"You are – unhappy?"

The man's voice shook as he put his question.

"It isn't that. I'm happy enough, I suppose. Only – only – I think I'm frightened now, or something. All my dreams seem to have tumbled about my ears. I have no longer that wonderful looking forward. Is it because he is mine now, and no one can take him from me? Or is it," her voice dropped to an awed whisper, "that – I – don't –"

She broke off as though afraid to say all she feared. Dave lit his pipe and smoked slowly and thoughtfully. He had gone through his ordeal listening to her, and now felt that he could face anything without giving his own secret away. He must reassure her. He must remove the doubt in her mind, for, in his quiet, reasoning way, he told himself that all her future happiness was at stake.

"No, it's not that, Betty," he said earnestly. "It's not that you love him less. It's just that for all that year you've thought and thought and hoped about it – till there's nothing more to it," he added lamely. "You see, it's the same with all things. Realization is nothing. It's all in the anticipation. You wait, little girl. When things are fixed, and Parson Tom has said 'right,' you'll – why, you'll just be the happiest little bit of a girl in Malkern. That's sure."

Betty lifted her eyes to his ugly face and looked straight into the kindly eyes. Just for one impulsive moment she reached out and took hold of his knotty hand and squeezed it.

"Dave, you are the dearest man in the world. You are the kindest and best," she cried with unusual emotion. "I wonder –" and she turned away to hide the tears that had suddenly welled up into her troubled eyes.

But Dave had seen them, and he dared not trust himself to speak. He sat desperately still and sucked at his pipe, emitting great clouds of smoke till the pungent fumes bit his tongue.

Then relief came from an unexpected quarter. There was a sharp crackling of bush just above where they sat and the scrunch of crushing pine cones trodden under foot, and Jim Truscott stepped on to the bridge.

"Ah, here you are at last. My word, but I had a job to find you."

His tone was light and easy, but his usually smiling face was clouded. Betty sprang to her feet.

"What is it, Jim?" she demanded, searching his face. "Something is wrong. I know it is."

Jim seated himself directly in front of Dave, who now watched him with added interest. He now noticed several things in the boy he did not remember having observed before. The face in repose, or rather without the smile it usually wore, bore signs of weakness about the mouth. The whole of the lower part of it lacked the imprint of keen decision. There was something almost effeminate about the mould of his full lips, something soft and yielding – even vicious. The rest of his face was good, and even intellectual. He was particularly handsome, with crisp curling hair of a light brown that closely matched his large expressive eyes. His tall athletic figure was strangely at variance with the intellectual cast of his face and head. But what Dave most noticed were the distinct lines of dissipation about his eyes. And he wondered how it was he had never seen them before. Perhaps it was that he so rarely saw Jim without his cheery smile. Perhaps, now that Betty had told him what had taken place, his observation was closer, keener.

"What is it, Jim?" He added his voice to Betty's inquiry. Jim's face became gloomier. He turned to the girl, who had resumed her seat at Dave's side.

"Have you told him?" he asked, and for a moment his eyes brightened with a shadow of their old smile.

The girl nodded, and Dave answered for her.

"She's told me enough to know you're the luckiest fellow in the Red Sand Valley," he said kindly.

Jim glanced up into the girl's face with all the passion of his youthful heart shining in his handsome eyes.

"Yes, I am, Dave – in that way," he said. Then his smile faded out and was replaced by a brooding frown. "But all the luck hasn't come my way. I've talked to Parson Tom."

"Ah!" Dave's ejaculation was ominous.

Suddenly Jim exploded, half angrily, half pettishly, like a disappointed schoolboy.

"Betty, I've got to go away. Your uncle says so. He asked me all about my mill, what my profits were, and all that. I told him honestly. I know I'm not doing too well. He said I wasn't making enough to keep a nigger servant on. He told me that until I could show him an income of \$2,500 a year there was to be no talk of engagement. What is more, he said he couldn't have me philandering about after you until there was a reasonable prospect of that income. We talked and argued, but he was firm. And in the end he advised me, if I were really in earnest and serious, to go right away, take what capital I had, and select a new and rising country to start in. He pointed out that there was not room enough here for two in the lumbering business; that Dave, here, complained of the state of trade, so what chance could I possibly have without a tithe of his resources. Finally, he told me to go and think out a plan, talk it over with you, and then tell him what I had decided upon. So here I am, and – "

"So am I," added Betty.

"And as I am here as well," put in Dave, "let's talk it over now. Where are you thinking of going?"

"Seems to me the Yukon is the place. There's a big rush going on. There's great talk of fabulous fortunes there."

"Yes, fabulous," said Dave dryly. "It's a long way. A big fare. You'll find yourself amongst all the scum and blacklegs of this continent. You'll be up against every proposition known to the crook. You'll get tainted. Why not do some ranching? Somewhere around here, toward Edmonton."

Jim shook his head gloomily.

"I haven't nearly enough capital."

"Maybe I could manage it for you," said Dave thoughtfully. "I mean it as a business proposition," he added hastily.

Jim's face cleared, and his ready smile broke out like sunshine after a summer storm.

"Would you?" he cried. "Yes, a business proposition. Business interest. I know the very place," he went on ardently. "Betty, wouldn't that be bully? How would you like to be a rancher's wife?"

But his spirits quickly received a damper. Betty shook her head.

"No, Jim. Not at Dave's expense." Then she turned to the man who had made the offer. "No, no, Dave, old friend. Jim and I know you. This is not business from your point of view. You added that to disguise your kindly intention."

"But – " Dave began to protest.

But Betty would have none of it.

"This is a debate," she said, with a brightness she did not feel, "and I am speaking. Jim," she turned gently to her lover, "we'll start fair and square with the world. You must do as uncle says. And you can do it. Do it yourself – yourself unaided. God will help you – surely. You are clever; you have youth, health and strength. I will wait for you all my life, if necessary. You have my promise, and it is yours until you come back to claim me. It may be only a year or two. We must be very, very brave. Whatever plan you decide on, if it is the Yukon, or Siberia, or anywhere else, I am content, and I will wait for you."

The girl's words were so gently spoken, yet they rang with an irrevocable decision that astonished her hearers. Dave looked into the pretty, set face. He had known her so long. He had seen her in almost every mood, yet here was a fresh side to her character he had never even suspected, and the thought flashed through his mind, to what heights of ambition might a man not soar with such a woman at his side.

Jim looked at her too. But his was a stare of amazement, and even resentment.

"But why, Betty?" he argued sharply. "Why throw away a business offer such as this, when it means almost certain success? Dave offered it himself, and surely you will allow that he is a business man before all things."

"Is he?" Betty smiled. Then she turned to the man who had made the offer. "Dave, will you do something for me?"

"Why, yes, Betty – if it's not to go and wash up cups down there," he replied at once, with a grin.

"No, it isn't to wash cups. It's" – she glanced quickly at Jim, who was watching her with anything but a lover-like stare – "it's – to withdraw that offer."

Dave removed his pipe and turned to Jim.

"That ranch business is off," he said.

Then he suddenly sat up and leant toward the younger man.

"Jim, boy, you know I wish you well," he said. "I wish you so well that I understand and appreciate Betty's decision now, though I allow I didn't see it at first. She's right. Parson Tom is right. I was wrong. Get right out into the world and make her a home. Get right out and show her, and the rest of us, the stuff you're made of. You won't fail if you put your back into it. And when you come back it'll be a great day for you both. And see here, boy, so long as you run straight you can ask me anything in the name of friendship, and I'll not fail you. Here's my hand on it."

Something of Dave's earnestness rather than the girl's quiet strength seemed to suddenly catch hold of and lift the dejected man out of his moodiness. His face cleared and his sunny smile broke out again. He gripped the great hand, and enthusiasm rang in his voice.

"By God, you're right, Dave," he cried. "You're a good chap. Yes, I'll go. Betty," he turned to the girl, "I'll go to the Yukon, where there's gold for the seeking. I'll realize all the money I can. I won't part with my mill. That will be my fall-back if I fail. But I won't fail. I'll make money by – no, I'll make money. And – " Suddenly, at the height of his enthusiasm, his face fell, and the buoyant spirit dropped from him.

"Yes, yes," broke in Betty, anxious to see his mood last.

Jim thought for a moment while the clouds gathered on his face. Then he looked steadily at Dave.

"Dave," he said, and paused. Then he began again. "Dave – in friendship's name – I'll ask you something now. Betty here," he swallowed, as though what he had to say was very difficult. "You see, I may be away a long time, you can never tell. Will you – will you take care of her for me? Will you be her – her guardian, as you have always been mine? I know I'm asking a lot, but somehow I can't leave her here, and – I know there's her uncle and aunt. But, I don't know, somehow I'd like to think you had given me your word that she would be all right, that you were looking after her for me. Will you?"

His face and tone were both eager, and full of real feeling. Dave never flinched as he listened to the request, yet every word cut into his heart, lashed him till he wondered how it was Jim could not see and understand. He moistened his lips. He groped in his pocket for his matches and lit one. He let it burn out, watching it until the flame nearly reached his fingers. Then he knocked his pipe out on his boot, and broke it with the force he used. Finally he looked up with a smile, and his eyes encountered Betty's.

She smiled back, and he turned to her lover, who was waiting for his answer.

"Sure I'll look after her – for you," he said slowly.

Jim sprang to his feet.

"I can never thank – "

But Dave cut him short.

"Don't thank me, boy," he said, preparing to return to the camp. "Just – get out and do." And he left the lovers to return at their leisure.

CHAPTER III

AFFAIRS IN MALKERN

Four glowing summers have gone; a fifth is dawning, driving before its radiant splendor the dark shadows and gray monotony of winter's icy pall. Malkern is a busy little town, spreading out its feelers in the way of small houses dotted about amidst the park land of the valley. Every year sees a further and further extension of its boarded sidewalks and grass-edged roadways; every year sees its population steadily increasing; every year sees an advancement in the architecture of its residences, and some detail displaying additional prosperity in its residents.

Behind this steady growth of prosperity sits Dave, large, quiet, but irresistible. His is the guiding hand. The tiller of the Malkern ship is in his grasp, and it travels the laid course without deviation whatsoever. The harbor lies ahead, and, come storm or calm, he drives steadily on for its haven.

Thus far has the man been content. Thus far have his ambitions been satisfied. He has striven, and gained his way inch by inch; but with that striving has grown up in him a desire such as inevitably comes to the strong and capable worker. A steady success creates a desire to achieve a master-stroke, whereby the fruit which hitherto he has been content to pluck singly falls in a mass into his lap. And therein lies the human nature which so often upsets the carefully trained and drilled method of the finest tempered brain.

Dave saw his goal looming. He saw clearly that all that he had worked for, hoped for, could be gained at one stroke. That one stroke meant capturing the great government contract for the lumber required for building the new naval docks. It was a contract involving millions of dollars, and, with all the courage with which his spirit was laden, he meant to attempt the capture. His plans had been silently laid. No detail had been forgotten, no pains spared. Night and day his thoughtful brain had worked upon his scheme, and now had come that time when he must sit back and wait for the great moment. Nor did this great moment depend on him, and therein lay the uncertainty, the gamble so dear to the human heart.

His scheme had been confided to only three people, and these were with him now, sitting on the veranda of the Rev. Tom Chepstow's house. The house stood on a slightly rising ground facing out to the east, whence a perfect view of the wide-spreading valley was obtained. It was a modest enough place, but trim and carefully kept. Parson Tom's stipend was so limited and uncertain that luxury was quite impossible; a rigid frugality was the ruling in his small household.

It was Saturday. The day's work was over, and the family were watching the sunset and awaiting the hour for supper. The parson was luxuriating in a pipe in a well-worn deck-chair at one extremity of the deep, wild-cucumber-covered veranda. Dave sat near him; Mary Chepstow, the parson's wife, was crocheting a baby's woolen jacket, stoutly comfortable in a leather armchair; while Betty, a little more mature in figure, a little quieter in manner, but even prettier and more charming to look at than she was on the day of her picnic nearly five years ago, occupied a seat near the open French window, ready to attend at a moment's notice to the preparing of supper.

Betty had been silent for quite a while. She was staring with introspective gaze out in the direction of the railroad depot. The two men had been discussing the best means of raising the funds for the building of a new church, aided by a few impracticable suggestions from Mrs. Chepstow, who had a way of counting her stitches aloud in the midst of her remarks. Suddenly Betty turned to her uncle, whose lean, angular frame was grotesquely hunched up in his deck-chair.

"Will old Mudley bring the mail over if the train does come in this evening?" she inquired abruptly.

The parson shook his head. His lean, clean-shaven face lit with a quizzical smile as he glanced over at his niece.

"Why should he?" he replied. "He never does bring mail round. Are you expecting a letter – from him?"

There was no self-consciousness in the girl's manner as she replied. There was not even warmth.

"Oh, no; I was wondering if I should get one from Maud Hardwig. She promised to write me how Lily's wedding went off in Regina. It is a nuisance about the strike. But it's only the plate-layers, isn't it; and it only affects the section where they are constructing east of Winnipeg?"

Her uncle removed his pipe.

"Yes. But it affects indirectly the whole system. You see, they won't put on local mails from Regina. They wait for the eastern mail to come through. By the way, how long is it since you heard from Jim?"

Betty had turned away and was watching the vanishing point of the railway track, where it entered the valley a couple of miles away. Dave's steady eyes turned upon her. But she didn't answer at once, and her uncle had to call her attention.

"Betty!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, uncle," she replied at once. "I was dreaming. When did I hear? Oh, nearly nine months ago."

Mary Chepstow looked up with a start.

"Nine months? Gracious, child – there, I've done it wrong."

Bending over her work she withdrew her hook and started to unravel the chain she was making.

"Yes," Betty went on coldly. "Nine months since I had a letter. But I've heard indirectly."

Her uncle sat up.

"You never told me," he said uneasily.

The girl's indifference was not without its effect on him. She never talked of Jim Truscott now. And somehow the subject was rarely broached by any of them. Truscott had nominally gone away for two or three years, but they were already in the fifth year since his departure, and there was as yet no word of his returning. Secretly her uncle was rather pleased at her silence on the subject. He augured well from it. He did not think there was to be any heart-breaking over the matter. He had never sanctioned any engagement between them, but he had been prepared to do so if the boy turned up under satisfactory conditions. Now he felt that it was time to take action in the matter. Betty was nearly twenty-seven, and – well, he did not want her to spend her life waiting for a man who showed no sign of returning.

"I didn't see the necessity," she said quietly. "I heard of him through Dave."

The parson swung round on the master of the mills. His keen face was alert with the deepest interest.

"You, Dave?" he exclaimed.

The lumberman stirred uneasily, and Mary Chepstow let her work lie idle in her lap.

"Dawson – my foreman, you know – got a letter from Mansell. You remember Mansell? He acted as Jim's foreman at his mill. A fine sawyer, Mansell – "

"Yes, yes." Parson Tom's interest made him impatient.

"Well, you remember that Mansell went with Jim when he set out for the Yukon. They intended to try their luck together. Partners, of course. Well, Mansell wrote Dawson he was sick to death of worrying things out up there. He said he'd left Jim, but did not state why. He asked him if my mill was going strong, and would there be a job for him if he came back. He said that Jim was making money now. He had joined a man named Broncho Bill, a pretty hard citizen, and in consequence he was doing better. How he was making money he didn't say. But he finished up

his remarks about the boy by saying he'd leave him to tell his own story, as he had no desire to put any one away."

Mrs. Chepstow offered no comment, but silently picked up her work and went on with it. Her husband sat back in his chair, stretching his long muscular legs, and folding his hands behind his head. Betty displayed not the least interest in Dave's haltingly told story.

The silence on the veranda was ominous. Chepstow began to refill his pipe, furtively watching his niece's pretty profile as she sat looking down the valley. It was his wife who broke the oppressive silence.

"I can't believe badly – three treble in the adjacent hole" – she muttered, referring to her pattern book, "of him. I always liked him – five chain."

"So do I," put in Dave with emphasis.

Betty glanced quickly into his rugged face.

"You don't believe the insinuations of that letter?" she asked him sharply.

"I don't."

Dave's reply was emphatic. Betty smiled over at him. Then she jumped up from her seat and pointed down the track.

"There's the mail," she cried. Then she came to her aunt's side and laid a hand coaxingly on her shoulder. "Will you see to supper, dear, if I go down for the mail?"

Mrs. Chepstow would not trust herself to speak, she was in the midst of a complicated manipulation of the pattern she was working, so she contented herself with a nod, and Betty was off like the wind. The two men watched her as she sped down the hard red sand trail, and neither spoke until a bend in the road hid her from view.

"She's too good a girl, Dave," Chepstow said with almost militant warmth. "She's not going to be made a fool of by – by –"

"She won't be made a fool of by any one," Dave broke in with equal warmth. "There's no fear of it, if I'm any judge," he added. "I don't think you realize that girl's spirit, Tom. Here, I'll tell you something I've never told anybody. When Jim went away Betty came to me and asked me to let her study my mills. She wanted to learn all the business of 'em. All the inside of the management of 'em. If I'd have let her she'd have learnt how to run the saws. And do you know why she did it? I'll tell you. Because she thought Jim might come back broke, and he and she together could start up his old mill again, so as to win through. That's Betty. Can you beat it? That girl has made up her mind to a certain line of action, and she'll see it through, no matter what her feelings may be. No word of yours, or mine, will turn her from her purpose. She'll wait for Jim."

"Yes, and waste the best of her life," exclaimed Mrs. Chepstow. "One, two, three – turn."

Dave smiled over at the rotund figure crocheting so assiduously. Although Mary Chepstow was over forty her face still retained its youthful prettiness. The parson laughed. He generally laughed at his wife's views upon anything outside of her small household and the care of the sick villagers. But it was never an unkind laugh. Just a large, tolerant good-nature, a pronounced feature in his character. Parson Tom, like many kindly men, was hasty of temper, even fiery, and being a man of considerable athletic powers, this characteristic had, on more than one occasion, forcibly brought some recalcitrant member of his uncertain-tempered flock to book, and incidentally acquired for him the sobriquet of "the fighting parson."

"I don't know about wasting the best of her life," he said. "Betty has never wasted her life. Look at the school she's got now. And, mark you, she's done it all herself. She has three teachers under her. She has negotiated all the finance of the school herself. She got the government by the coat-tails and dragged national support out of it. Why, she's a wonder. No, no, not waste, Mary. Let her wait if she chooses. We won't interfere. I only hope that when Jim does come back he'll be a decent citizen. If he isn't, I'd bet my last cent Betty will know how to deal with him."

"She'll sure give him up, if he isn't," said Dave with conviction.

Mary looked up, her round blue eyes twinkling.

"Dave knows Betty better than we do, Tom. I'd almost think – I'm not sure I like this shade of pink," she digressed, examining her wool closely. "Er – what was I saying? Oh, yes – I'd almost think he'd made a special study of her."

A deep flush spread slowly over Dave's ugly face, and he tried to hide it by bending over his pipe and examining the inside of the bowl.

Parson Tom promptly changed the subject. He shook his head and turned away to watch the ruddy extravagance of the sunset in the valley.

"Dave has got far too much to think of in his coming government contract to bother with a girl like Betty. By the way, when do you expect to hear the result of your tender, Dave?"

"Any time."

The lumberman's embarrassment had vanished at the mention of his contract. His eyes lit, and the whole of his plain features were suddenly illumined. This was his life's purpose. This contract meant everything to him. All that had gone before, all his labor, his early struggles, they were nothing to the store he set by this one great scheme.

"Good. And your chances?" There was the keenest interest in the parson's question.

"Well, I'd say they're good. You see, that find of ours up in the hills opens a possibility we never had before. The new docks require an enormous supply of ninety-foot timber. It's got to be ninety-foot stuff. Well, we've got the timber in that new find. There's a valley of some thousands of acres of forest which will supply it. Tom," he went on eagerly, "we could cut 'em hundred-and-twenty-foot logs from that forest till the cows come home. It's the greatest proposition in lumbering. It's one of the greatest of those great primordial pine forests which are to be found in the Rockies, if one is lucky enough. At present we are the only people in Canada who can give them the stuff they need, and enough of it. Yes, I think I'll get it. I've set the wires pulling all I know. I've cut the price. I've done everything I can, and I think I'll get it. If I do I'll be a millionaire half a dozen times over, and Malkern, and all its people, will rise to an immense prosperity. I must get it! And having got it, I must push it through successfully."

Mary and her husband were hanging on the lumberman's words, carried away by his enthusiasm. There was that light of battle in his eyes, the firm setting of his heavy under-jaw, which they knew and understood so well. To them he was the personification of resolution. To them his personality was irresistible.

"Of course you'll push it through successfully," Tom nodded.

"Yes, yes. I shall. I must," Dave said, stirring his great body in his chair with a restlessness which spoke of his nervous tension. "But it's this time limit. You see, it's a government contract. They want these naval docks built quickly. The whole scheme is to be rushed through. Since the Imperial Conference has decided that each colony is to build its own share of the navy for imperial defense, in view of the European situation, that building is to be begun at once. They are laying down five ships this year, and, by the end of the year, they are to have docks ready for the laying down of six more. My contract is for the lumber for those docks. You see? My contract must be completed before winter closes down, without fail. I have guaranteed that. Well, as I am the only lumberman in Canada that can supply this heavy lumber, if they do not give it to me they will have to go to the States for it. Yes," he added, with something like a sigh, "I think I shall get it. But – this time limit! If I fail it will break me, and, in the crash, Malkern will go too."

Mary Chepstow sighed with emotion. Her crochet was forgotten.

"You won't fail," she murmured, her eyes glistening. "You can't!"

"Malkern isn't going to tumble about our ears, old friend," Parson Tom said with quiet assurance.

Dave had fallen back into his lounging attitude and puffed at his pipe.

"No," he said. Then he pointed down the trail in the direction of the depot. "There's Betty coming along in a hurry with Jenkins Mudley."

All eyes turned to look. Betty was almost running beside the tall thin figure of the operator and postmaster of Malkern. They came up with a final rush, the man flourishing a telegram at Dave. Betty was carrying a number of letters.

"I just thought I'd bring this along myself," Mudley grinned. "Everything's been delayed through the strike down east. This, too. Felt I'd hate to let any one else hand it to you, Dave."

Dave snatched at the tinted envelope and tore it open, while Betty, nodding at her uncle and aunt, her eyes dancing with delight, made frantic signs to them. But they took no notice of her, keeping their eyes fixed on the towering form of the master of the mills. Dave was the calmest man present. He read the message over twice, and then deliberately thrust it into his pocket. Then, as he returned to his seat, he said – "I've got my contract, folks."

"Hurrah!" cried Betty, no longer able to control herself. The operator had previously imparted the fact to her. Then, with a jump, she was on the veranda and flung some letters into her uncle's lap, retaining one for herself that had already been read. The next moment she had seized both of Dave's great hands, and was wringing them with all her heart and soul shining in her eyes.

"I'm so – so glad, I don't know what I'm doing or saying," she cried, and then collapsed on her uncle's knee.

Dave laughed quietly, but her aunt, her face belying her words, reproved her gently.

"Betty," she said warningly as the girl scrambled to her feet, "don't get excited. I think you'd better go and see to supper. I see you got your letter. How did the wedding go off?"

Betty was leaning against one of the veranda posts.

"Oh, yes," she said indifferently. "I'd forgotten my letter. It's from Jim. He's coming home."

Her aunt suddenly picked up her work. The parson began to open his letters. Dave's eyes, until that moment smiling, suddenly became serious. The girl's news had a strangely damping effect. Dave cleared his throat as though about to speak. But he remained silent.

Then Betty moved across to the door.

"I'll go and get supper," she said quietly, and vanished into the house.

CHAPTER IV

DICK MANSELL'S NEWS

For Dave the next fortnight was fraught with a tremendous pressure of work. But arduous and wearing as it was, to him there was that thrill of conscious striving which is the very essence of life to the ambition-inspired man. His goal loomed dimly upon his horizon, he could see it in shadowy outline, and every step he took now, every effort he put forth, he knew was carrying him on, drawing him nearer and nearer to it. He worked with that steady enthusiasm which never rushes. He was calm and purposeful. To hasten, to diverge from his deliberate course in the heat of excitement, he knew would only weaken his effort. Careful organization, perfect, machine-like, was what he needed, and the work would do itself.

At the mills a large extension of the milling floors and an added number of saws were needed. In its present state the milling floor could hardly accommodate the ninety-foot logs demanded by the contract. This was a structural alteration that must be carried out at express speed, and had been prepared for, so that it was only a matter of executing plans already drawn up. Joel Dawson, the foreman, one of the best lumbermen in the country, was responsible for the alterations. Simon Odd, the master sawyer, had the organizing of the skilled labor staff inside the mill, a work of much responsibility and considerable discrimination.

But with Dave rested the whole responsibility and chief organization. It was necessary to secure labor for both the mill and the camps up in the hills. And for this the district had to be scoured, while two hundred lumber-jacks had to be brought up from the forests of the Ottawa River.

Dave and his lieutenants worked all their daylight hours, and most of the night was spent in harness. They ate to live only, and slept only when their falling eyelids refused to keep open.

Only Dave and his two loyal supporters knew the work of that fortnight; only they understood the anxiety and strain, but their efforts were crowned with success, and at the end of that time the first of the "ninety-footers" floated down the river to the mouth of the great boom that lay directly under the cranes of the milling floor.

It was not until that moment that Dave felt free to look about him, to turn his attention from the grindstone of his labors. It was midday when word passed of the arrival of the first of the timber, and he went at once to verify the matter for himself. It was a sight to do his heart good. The boom, stretching right into the heart of the mills, was a mass of rolling, piling logs, and a small army of men was at work upon them piloting them so as to avoid a "crush." It was perilous, skilful work, and the master of the mills watched with approval the splendid efforts of these intrepid lumber-jacks. He only waited until the rattling chains of the cranes were lowered and the first log was grappled and lifted like a match out of the water, and hauled up to the milling floor. Then, with a sigh as of a man relieved of a great strain, he turned away and passed out of his yards.

It was the first day for a fortnight he had gone to his house for dinner.

His home was a small house of weather-boarding with a veranda all creeper-grown, as were most of the houses in the village. It had only one story, and every window had a window-box full of simple flowers. It stood in a patch of garden that was chiefly given up to vegetables, with just a small lawn of mean-looking turf with a centre bed of flowers. Along the top-railed fence which enclosed it were, set at regular intervals, a number of small blue-gum and spruce trees. It was just such an abode as one might expect Dave to possess: simple, useful, unpretentious. It was the house of a man who cared nothing for luxury. Utility was the key-note of his life. And the little trivial decorations in the way of creepers, flowers, and such small luxuries were due to the gentle, womanly thought of his old mother, with whom he lived, and who permitted no one else to minister to his wants.

She was in the doorway when he came up, a small thin figure with shriveled face and keen, questioning eyes. She was clad in black, and wore a print overall. Her snow-white hair was parted in the middle and smoothed down flat, in the method of a previous generation. She was an alert little figure for all her sixty odd years.

The questioning eyes changed to a look of gladness as the burly figure of her son turned in at the gate. There could be no doubt as to her feelings. Dave was all the world to her. Her admiration for her son amounted almost to idolatry.

"Dinner's ready," she said eagerly. "I thought I'd just see if you were coming. I didn't expect you. Have you time for it, Dave?"

"Sure, ma," he responded, stooping and kissing her upturned face. "The logs are down."

"Dear boy, I'm glad."

It was all she said, but her tone, and the look she gave him, said far more than the mere words.

Dave placed one great arm gently about her narrow shoulders and led her into the house.

"I'm going to take an hour for dinner to-day sure," he said, with unusual gaiety. "Just to celebrate. After this," he went on, "for six months I'm going to do work that'll astonish even you, ma."

"But you won't overdo it, Dave, will you? The money isn't worth it. It isn't really. I've lived a happy life without much of it, boy, and I don't want much now. I only want my boy."

There was a world of gentle solicitude in the old woman's tones. So much that Dave smiled upon her as he took his place at the table.

"You'll have both, ma, just as sure as sure. I'm not only working for the sake of the money. Sounds funny to say that when I'm working to make myself a millionaire. But it's not the money. It's success first. I don't like being beaten, and that's a fact. We Americans hate being beaten. Then there's other things. Think of these people here. They'll do well. Malkern'll be a city to be reckoned with, and a prosperous one. Then the money's useful to do something with. We can help others. You know, ma, how we've talked it all out."

The mother helped her son to food.

"Yes, I know. But your health, boy, you must think of that."

Dave laughed boisterously, an unusual thing with him. But his mood was light. He felt that he wanted to laugh at anything. What did anything matter? By this time a dozen or so of the "ninety-footers" were already in the process of mutilation by his voracious saws.

"Health, ma?" he cried. "Look at me. I don't guess I'm pretty, but I can do the work of any French-Canadian horse in my yards."

The old woman shook her silvery head doubtfully.

"Well, well, you know best," she said, "only I don't want you to get ill."

Dave laughed again. Then happening to glance out of the window he saw the figure of Joe Hardwig, the blacksmith, turning in at the gate.

"Another plate, ma," he said hastily. "There's Hardwig coming along."

His mother summoned her "hired" girl, and by the time Hardwig's knock came at the door a place was set for him. Dave rose from the table.

"Come right in, Joe," he said cheerily. "We're just having grub. Ma's got some bully stew. Sit down and join us."

But Joe Hardwig declined, with many protestations. He was a broad, squat little man, whose trade was in his very manner, in the strength of his face, and in the masses of muscle which his clothes could not conceal.

"The missus is wantin' me," he said. "Thank you kindly all the same. Your servant, mam," he added awkwardly, turning to Dave's mother. Then to the lumberman, "I jest come along to hand you a bit of information I guessed you'd be real glad of. Mansell – Dick Mansell's got back! I've been yarnin' with him. Say, guess you'll likely need him. He's wantin' a job too. He's a bully sawyer."

Dave had suddenly become serious.

"Dick Mansell!" he cried. Then, after a pause, "Has he brought word of Jim Truscott?"

The mother's eyes were on her son, shrewdly speculating. She had seen his sudden gravity. She knew full well that he cared less for Mansell's powers as a sawyer than for Mansell as the companion and sharer of Jim Truscott's exile. Now she waited for the blacksmith's answer.

Joe shifted uneasily. His great honest face looked troubled. He had not come there to spill dirty water. He knew how much Dave wanted skilled hands, and he knew that Dick needed work.

"Why, yes," he said at last. "At least – that is – "

"Out with it, man," cried Dave, with unusual impatience. "How is Jim, and – how has he done?"

Just for an instant Joe let an appealing glance fall in the old woman's direction, but he got no encouragement from her. She was steadily proceeding with her dinner. Besides, she never interfered with her boy. Whatever he did was always right to her.

"Well?" Dave urged the hesitating man.

"Oh, I guess he's all right. That is – he ain't hard up. Why yes, he was speakin' of him," Joe stumbled on. "He guessed he was comin' along down here later. That is, Jim is – you see – "

But Dave hated prevarication. He could see that Joe didn't want to tell what he had heard. However he held him to it fast.

"Has Jim been running straight?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh, as to that – I guess so," said Joe awkwardly.

Dave came over to where Joe was still standing, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"See here, Joe, we all know you; you're a good sportsman, and you don't go around giving folks away – and bully for you. But I'd rather you told me what Mansell's told you than that he should tell me. See? It won't be peaching. I've got to hear it."

Joe looked straight up into his face, and suddenly his eyes lit angrily at his own thought. "Yes, you'd best have it," he exclaimed, all his hesitation gone; "that dogone boy's been runnin' a wild racket. He's laid hold of the booze and he's never done a straight day's work since he hit the Yukon trail. He's comin' back to here with a gambler's wad in his pocketbook, and – and – he's dead crooked. Leastways, that's how Mansell says. It's bin roulette, poker an' faro. An' he's bin runnin' the joint. Mansell says he ain't no sort o' use for him no ways, and that he cut adrift from the boy directly he got crooked."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Dave, after a thoughtful pause. "I don't seem to remember that Dick Mansell was any saint. I'd have thought a crooked life would have fallen in with his views, but he preferred to turn the lad adrift when he most needed help. However, it don't signify. So the lad's coming back a drunkard, a gambler and a crook? At least Dick Mansell says so. Does he say why he's coming back?"

"Well, he s'poses it's the girl – Miss Betty."

"Ah!"

Joe shifted uneasily.

"It don't seem right – him a crook," he said, with some diffidence.

"No." Then Dave's thoughtful look suddenly changed to one of business alertness, and his tone became crisp. "See here, Joe, what about that new tackle for the mills? Those hooks and chains must be ready in a week. Then there's those cant-hooks for the hill camps. The smiths up there are hard at it, so I'm going to look to you for a lot. Then there's another thing. Is your boy Alec fit to join the mills and take his place with the other smiths? I want another hand."

"Sure, he's a right good lad – an' thankee. I'll send him along right away." The blacksmith was delighted. He always wanted to get his boy taken on at the mill. The work that came his way he could cope with himself; besides, he had an assistant. He didn't want his boy working under him; it was not his idea of things. It was far better that he should get out and work under strangers.

"Well, that's settled."

Dave turned to his dinner and Joe Hardwig took his leave, and when mother and son were left together again the old woman lost no time in discussing Dick Mansell and his unpleasant news.

"I never could bear that Mansell," she said, with a severe shake of her head.

"No, ma. But he's a good sawyer – and I need such men."

The old woman looked up quickly.

"I was thinking of Jim Truscott."

"That's how I guessed."

"Well? What do you think?"

Dave shook his head.

"I haven't seen Jim yet," he said. "Ma, we ain't Jim's judges."

"No."

"I'm going down to the depot," Dave said after a while. "Guess I've got some messages to send. I'm getting anxious about that strike. They say that neither side will give way. The railway is pretty arbitrary on this point, and the plate-layers are a strong union. I've heard that the brakesmen and engine-drivers are going to join them. If they do, it's going to be bad for us. That is, in a way. Strikes are infectious, and I don't want 'em around here just now. We've got to cut a hundred thousand foot a day steady, and anything delaying us means – well, it's no use thinking what it means. We've got to be at full work night and day until we finish. I'll get going."

He pushed his plate away and rose from the table. He paused while he filled and lit his pipe, then he left the house. Joe Hardwig's news had disturbed him more than he cared to admit, and he did not want to discuss it, even with his mother.

CHAPTER V

JIM TRUSCOTT RETURNS

Dave was on the outskirts of the village when he fell in with Parson Tom. Tom was on ahead, but he saw the great lumbering figure swinging along the trail behind him, and waited.

"Hello, Dave," he greeted him, as he came up. "It's ages since I've seen you."

The master of the mills laughed good-naturedly.

"Sure," he said, "my loafing days are over. I'll be ground hollow before I'm through. The grindstone's good and going. It's good to be at work, Tom. I mean what you'd call at your great work. When I'm through you shall have the finest church that red pine can build."

"Ah, it's good to hear you talk like that. I take it things are running smoothly. It's not many men who deserve to make millions, but I think you are one of the few."

Dave shook his head.

"You're prejudiced about me, Tom," he replied smiling, "but I want that money. And when I get it we'll carry out all our schemes. You know, the schemes we've talked over and planned and planned. Well, when the time comes, we won't forget 'em – "

"Like most people do. Hello!" The parson was looking ahead in the direction of a small crowd standing outside Harley-Smith's saloon. There was an anxious look in his clear blue eyes, and some comprehension. The crowd was swaying about in unmistakable fashion, and experience told him that a fight was in progress. He had seen so many fights in Malkern. Suddenly he turned to Dave —

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"To the depot."

"Good. I'll just cut along over there. That must be stopped."

Dave gazed at the swaying crowd. Several men were running to join it. Then he looked down from his great height at the slim, athletic figure of his friend.

"Do you want any help?" he inquired casually.

Parson Tom shook his head.

"No," he said, with a smile of perfect confidence. "They're children, all simple children. Big and awkward and unruly, if you like, but all children. I can manage them."

"I believe you can," said Dave. "Well, so long. Don't be too hard on them. Remember they're children."

Tom Chepstow laughed back at him as he hurried away.

"All right. But unruly children need physical correction as well as moral. And if it is necessary I shan't spare them."

He went off at a run, and Dave went on to the depot. He knew his friend down to his very core. There was no man in the village who was the parson's equal in the noble art of self-defense. And it was part of his creed to meet the rougher members of his flock on their own ground. He knew that this militant churchman would stop that fight, and, if necessary, bodily chastise the offenders. It was this wholesome manliness that had so endeared the "fighting parson" to his people. They loved him for his capacity, and consequently respected him far more than they would have done the holiest preacher that ever breathed. He was a man they understood.

The spiritual care of a small lumbering village is not lightly to be entered upon. A man must be peculiarly fitted for it. In such a place, where human nature is always at its crudest; where muscle, and not intellect, must always be the dominant note; where life is lived without a thought for the future, and the present concern is only the individual fitness to execute a maximum of labor, and so give expression to a savage vanity in the triumph of brute force, the man who would set out to guide his fellows must possess qualities all too rare in the general run of clergy. His theology

must be of the simplest, broadest order. He must live the life of his flock, and teach almost wholly by example. His preaching must be lit with a local setting, and his brush must lay on the color of his people's every-day life.

Besides this, he must possess a tremendous moral and physical courage, particularly the latter, for to the lumber-jack nothing else so appeals. He must feel that he is in the presence of a man who is always his equal, if not his superior, in those things he understands. Tom Chepstow was all this. He was a lumberman himself at heart. He knew every detail of the craft. He had lived that life all his manhood's days.

Then he possessed a rare gift in medicine. He had purposely studied it and taken his degrees, for no one knew better than he the strength this added to his position. He shed his healing powers upon his people, a gift that reaped him a devotion no sanctity and godliness could ever have brought him. Parson Tom was a practical Christian first, and attended only to spiritual welfare when the body had been duly cared for.

Dave went on to the depot, where he despatched his messages. Then he extracted from Jenkins Mudley all the information he possessed upon the matter of the plate-layers' strike, and finally took the river trail back to the mills.

His way took him across the log bridge over the river, and here he paused, leaning upon the rail, and gazed thoughtfully down the woodland avenue which enclosed the turbulent stream.

Somehow he could never cross that bridge without pausing to admire the wonderful beauty of his little friend's surroundings. He always thought of this river as his friend. How much it was his friend only he knew. But for it, and its peculiarities, his work would be impossible. He did not have to do as so many lumbermen have to, depend on the spring freshet to carry his winter cut down to his mill. The melting snows of the mountains kept the river flowing, a veritable torrent, during the whole of the open season, and at such time he possessed in it a never-failing transport line which cost him not one cent.

The hour he had allowed for his dinner was not yet up, and he felt that he could indulge himself a little longer, so he refilled his pipe and smoked while he gazed contemplatively into the depths of the dancing waters below him.

But his day-dreaming was promptly interrupted, and the interruption was the coming of Betty, on her way home to her dinner from the schoolhouse up on the hillside. He had seen her only once since the day that brought him the news of his contract. That was on the following Sunday, when he went, as usual, to Tom Chepstow's for supper.

Just at that moment Betty was the last person he wanted to see. That was his first thought when he heard her step on the bridge. He had forgotten that this was her way home, and that this was her dinner-time. However, there was no sign of his reluctance in his face when he greeted her.

"Why, Betty," he said, as gently as his great voice would let him, "I hadn't thought to see you coming this way." Then he broke off and studied her pretty oval face more closely. "What's wrong?" he inquired presently. "You look – you look kind of tired."

He was quite right. The girl looked pale under her tan, and there was an unusual darkness round her gentle brown eyes. She looked very tired, in spite of the smile of welcome with which she greeted him.

"Oh, I'm all right, Dave," she said at once. But her tone was cheerless, in spite of her best effort.

He shook his great head and knocked his pipe out.

"There's something amiss, child. Guess maybe it's the heat." He turned his eyes up to the blazing sun, as though to reassure himself that the heat was there.

Betty leant beside him on the rail. Her proximity, and the evident sadness of her whole manner, made him realize that he must not stay there. At that moment she looked such a pathetic

little figure that he felt he could not long be responsible for what he said. He longed to take her in his arms and comfort her.

He could think of nothing to say for a long time, but at last he broke out with —

"You'd best not go back to the school this afternoon."

But the girl shook her head.

"It's not that," she said. Then she paused. Her eyes were fixed on the rushing water as it flowed beneath the bridge.

He watched her closely, and gradually a conviction began to grow in his mind.

"Dave," she went on at last, "we've always been such good friends, haven't we? You've always been so patient and kind with me when I have bothered you with my little troubles and worries. You never fail to help me out. It seems to me I can never quite do without your help. I — I" — she smiled more like her old self, and with relief the man saw some of the alarming shadows vanishing from her face, "I don't think I want to, either. I've had a long talk with Susan Hardwig this morning."

"Ah!"

The man's growing conviction had received confirmation.

"What did that mean?" Betty asked quickly.

Dave was staring out down the river.

"Just nothing. Only I've had a goodish talk with Joe Hardwig."

"Then I needn't go into the details. I've heard the news that Dick Mansell has brought with him."

It was a long time before either spoke again. For Dave there seemed so little to say. What could he say? Sympathy was out of the question. He had no right to blame Jim yet. Nor did he feel that he could hold out hope to her, for in his heart he believed that the man's news was true.

With Betty, she hardly knew how to express her feelings. She hardly knew what her feelings were. At the time Mrs. Hardwig poured her tale into her ears she had listened quite impersonally. Somehow the story had not appealed to her as concerning herself, and her dominant thought had been pity for the man. It was not until afterward, when she was alone on her way to the school, that the full significance of it came to her; and then it came as a shock. She remembered, all of a sudden, that she was promised to Jim. That when Jim came back she was to marry him. From that moment the matter had never been out of her mind; through all her school hours it was with her, and her attention had been so distracted from her work that she found her small pupils getting out of hand.

Yes, she was to marry Jim, and they told her he was a drunkard, a gambler, and a "crook." She had given him her promise; she had sent him away. It was her own doing. Her feelings toward him never came into her thoughts. During the long five years of his absence he had become a sort of habit to her. She had never thought of her real feelings after the first month or two of his going. She was simply waiting for him, and would marry him when he came. It was only now, when she heard this story of him, that her feelings were called upon to assert themselves, and the result was something very like horror at her own position.

She remembered now her disappointment at the first realization of all her hopes, when Jim had asked her to marry him. She had not understood then, but now — now she did. She knew that she had never really loved him. And at the thought of his return she was filled with horror and dread.

She was glad that she had met Dave; she had longed to see him. He was the one person she could always lean on. And in her present trouble she wanted to lean on him.

"Dave," she began at last, in a voice so hopeless that it cut him to the heart, "somehow I believe that story. That is, in the main. Don't think it makes any difference to me. I shall marry him just the same. Only I seem to see him in his real light now. He was always weak, only I didn't see it then. He was not really the man to go out into the world to fight alone. We were wrong. I was wrong. He should have stayed here."

"Yes," Dave nodded.

"He must begin over again," she went on, after a pause. "When he comes here we must help him to a fresh start, and we must blot his past out of our minds altogether. There is time enough. He is young. Now I want you to help me. We must ask him no questions. If he wants to speak he can do so. Now that you are booming at the mills we can help him to reopen his mill, and I know you can, and will, help him by putting work in his way. All this is what I've been thinking out. When he comes, and we are – married," there was the slightest possible hesitation before the word, and Dave's quick ears and quicker senses were swift to hear and interpret it, "I am going to help him with the work. I'll give up my school. I've always had such a contingency in my mind. That's why I got you to teach me your work when he first went away. Tell me, Dave, you'll help me in this. You see the boy can't help his weakness. Perhaps we are stronger than he, and between us we can help him."

The man looked at her a long time in silence, and all the while his loyal heart was crying out. His gray eyes shone with a light she did not comprehend. She saw their fixed smile, and only read in them the assent he never withheld from her.

"I knew you would," she murmured.

It was her voice that roused him. And he spoke just as she turned away in the direction of the schoolhouse trail, whence proceeded the sound of a horse galloping.

"Yes, Betty – I'll help you sure," he said in his deep voice.

"You'll help him, you mean," she corrected, turning back to him.

But Dave ignored the correction.

"Tell me, Betty," he went on again, this time with evident diffidence: "you're glad he's coming back? You feel happy about – about getting married? You – love him?"

The girl stared straight up into the plain face. Her look was so honest, so full of decision, that her reply left no more to be said.

"Five years ago I gave him my promise. That promise I shall redeem, unless Jim, himself, makes its fulfilment impossible."

The man nodded.

"You can come to me for anything you need for him," he said simply.

Betty was about to answer with an outburst of gratitude when, with a rush, a horseman came galloping round the bend of the trail and clattered on to the bridge. At sight of the two figures standing by the rail the horse jibbed, threw himself on to his haunches, and then shied so violently that the rider was unseated and half out of the saddle, clinging desperately to the animal's neck to right himself. And as he hung there struggling, the string of filthy oaths that were hurled at the horse, and any and everybody, was so foul that Betty tried to stop her ears.

Dave sprang at the horse and seized the bridle with one hand, with the other he grabbed the horseman and thrust him up into the saddle. The feat could only have been performed by a man of his herculean strength.

"Cut that language, you gopher!" he roared into the fellow's ears as he lifted him.

"Cut the language!" cried the infuriated man. "What in hell are you standing on a bridge spooning your girl for? This bridge ain't for that sort of truck – it's for traffic, curse you!"

By the time the man had finished speaking he had straightened up in the saddle, and his face was visible to all. Dave jumped back, and Betty gave a little cry. It was Jim Truscott!

Yes, it was Jim Truscott, but so changed that even Betty could scarcely believe the evidence of her eyes. In place of the bright, clever-looking face, the slim figure she had always had in her mind during the long five years of his absence, she now beheld a bloated, bearded man, without one particle of the old refinement which had been one of his most pronounced characteristics. It seemed incredible that five years could have so changed him. Even his voice was almost unrecognizable, so husky had it become. His eyes no longer had their look of frank honesty, they were dull and

lustreless, and leered morosely. Her heart sank as she looked at him, and she remembered Dick Mansell's story.

All three stared for a moment without speaking. Then Jim broke into a laugh so harsh that it made the girl shudder.

"Well I'm damned!" he cried. "Of all the welcomes home this beats hell!"

"Jim – oh, Jim!"

The cry of horror and pain was literally wrung from the girl. Nor was it without effect. The man seemed to realize his uncouthness, for he suddenly took off his hat, and his face became serious.

"I beg your pardon, Betty," he said apologetically. "I forgot where I was. I forgot that the Yukon was behind me, and – "

"That you're talking to the lady you're engaged to be married to," put in Dave sharply.

Dave's words drew the younger man's attention to himself. For a second a malicious flash shone in the bloated eyes. Then he dropped them and held out his hand.

"How do, Dave?" he said coldly.

Dave responded without any enthusiasm. He was chilled, chilled and horrified, and he knew that Mansell's story was no exaggeration. He watched Jim turn again to Betty. He saw the strained look in the girl's eyes, and he waited.

"I'll come along up to the house later," Jim said coolly. "Guess I'll get along to the hotel and get cleaned some. I allow I ain't fit for party calls at a hog pen just about now. So long."

He jabbed his horse's sides with his heels and dashed across the bridge. In a moment he was gone.

It was some time before a word was spoken on the bridge. Dave was waiting, and Betty could find no words. She was frightened. She wanted to cry, and through it all her heart felt like lead in her bosom. But her dominant feeling was fear.

"Well, little Betty," said Dave presently, in that gentle protecting manner he so often assumed toward her, "I must go on to the mills. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going home," she said; and to the keenly sympathetic ears of the man the note of misery in her voice was all too plain.

CHAPTER VI

PARSON TOM INTERFERES

It was nearly five o'clock and the table was set for tea. Betty was standing at the window staring thoughtfully out upon the valley. Ordinarily her contemplation would have been one of delighted interest, for the scene was her favorite view of the valley, where every feature of it, the village, the mill, the river, assumed its most picturesque aspect.

She loved the valley with a deep affection. Unlike most people, who tire of their childhood's surroundings and pant for fresh sights, fresh fields in which to expand their thoughts and feelings, she clung to the valley with all an artist's love for the beautiful, and a strength inspired by the loyal affection of a simple woman. Her delight in her surroundings amounted almost to a passion. To her this valley was a treasured possession. The river was a friend, a fiery, turbulent friend, and often she had declared, when in a whimsical mood, one to whom she could tell her innermost secrets without fear of their being passed on, in confidence, to another, or of having them flung back in her face when spite stirred its tempestuous soul.

She knew her river's shortcomings, she knew its every mood. It was merely a torrent, a strenuous mountain torrent, but to her it possessed a real personality. In the spring flood it was like some small individual bursting with its own importance, with its vanity, with resentment at the restraint of the iron hand of winter, from which it had only just torn itself loose, and stirred to the depths of its frothy soul with an overwhelming desire for self-assertion. Often she had watched the splendid destruction of which it was capable at such a time. She had seen the forest giants go down at the roar of its battle-cry. She had often joined the villagers, standing fearful and dismayed, watching its mounting waters lest their homes should be devoured by the insatiable little monster, and filled with awe at its magnificent bluster.

Then, in the extreme heat of the late summer, when autumn had tinged the valley to a glorious gold and russet, she had just as often seen the reverse side of the picture. No longer could the river draw on the vast supplies of the melting mountain snows, and so it was doomed to fall a prey to the mighty grip of winter, and, as if in anticipation of its end, it would sing its song of sadness as it sobbed quietly over its fallen greatness, sighing dismally amongst the debris which in the days of its power it had so wantonly torn from its banks.

There was a great deal of the girl's character in her love for the river. She possessed an enthusiastic admiration for that strength which fights, fights until the last drop of blood, the last atom of power is expended. Fallen greatness evoked her enthusiasm as keenly as success, only that the enthusiasm was of a different nature. With her it was better to have striven with all one's might and encountered disaster than to have lived fallow, a life of the most perfect rectitude. Her twenty-seven years of life had set her thrilling with a mental and physical virility which was forever urging her, and steadily moulding her whole outlook upon life, even though that outlook carried her no farther than the confines of her beautiful sunlit valley.

Something of this was stirring within her now. She was not thinking of that which her eyes looked upon. She was thinking of the man to whom she had given her promise, her woman's promise, which carries with it all the best a woman has to give. She was no weakling, dreaming regretfully of all that might have been; she had no thought of retracting because in her heart she knew she had made a mistake. She was reviewing the man as she had seen him that noon, and considering the story of his doings as she had been told them, quietly making up her mind to her own line of action.

He was presently to come up to her home to have tea with them, and she would be given the opportunity of seeing the man that five years' absence in the wilds had made of him. Once

or twice she almost shuddered as the details of their meeting on the bridge obtruded themselves. She tried to shut them out. She understood the rough side of men, for she lived amongst a people in whom it was difficult enough to trace even a semblance of gentleness. She allowed for the moment of provocation when the man's horse had shied and unseated him. She realized the natural inclination it would inspire to forcibly, even if irresponsibly, protest. Even the manner of his protest she condoned. But his subsequent attitude, his appearance, and his manner toward herself, these were things which had an ugly tone, and for which she could find no extenuation.

However, it should all be settled that afternoon. She unfolded and straightened out a piece of paper she had been abstractedly crumpling in her hand. She glanced at the unsteady writing on it, a writing she hardly recognized as Jim's.

"Will come up to tea this afternoon. Sorry for this morning. – JIM."

That was the note he had sent her soon after she had reached home. There was no word of affection in it. Nothing but a bare statement and an apology which scarcely warranted the name. To her it seemed to have been prompted by the man's realization of an unpleasant and undesired duty to be performed. The few letters she had received from him immediately before his return had borne a similar tone of indifference, and once or twice she had felt that she ought to write and offer him his freedom. This, however, she had never done, feeling that by doing so she might be laying herself open to misinterpretation. No, if their engagement were distasteful to him, it must be Jim who broke it. Unlike most women, she would rather he threw her over than bear the stigma of having jilted him. She had thought this all out very carefully. She had an almost mannish sense of honor, just as she possessed something of a man's courage to carry out her obligations.

She glanced over the tea-table. There were four places set. The table was daintily arranged, and though the china was cheap, and there was no display of silver, or any elaborate furnishings, it looked attractive. The bread and butter was delicate, the assortment of home-made cakes luscious, the preserves the choicest from her aunt's store-cupboard. Betty had been careful, too, that the little sitting-room, with its simple furniture and unpretentious decorations, should be in the nicest order. She had looked to everything so that Jim's welcome should be as cordial as kindly hearts could make it. And now she was awaiting his coming.

The clock on the sideboard chimed five, and a few moments later her uncle came in.

"What about tea, Betty?" he inquired, glancing with approval at the careful preparations for the meal.

"I think we ought to wait," she replied, with a wistful smile into his keen blue eyes. "I sent word to Jim for five o'clock – but – well, perhaps something has detained him."

"No doubt," observed the parson dryly. "I dare say five minutes added on to five years means nothing to Jim."

He didn't approve the man's attitude at all. All his ideas on the subject of courtship had been outraged at his delay in calling. He had been in the village nearly five hours.

The girl rearranged the teacups.

"You mustn't be hard on him," she said quietly. "He had to get cleaned up and settled at the hotel. I don't suppose he'd care to come here like – like –"

"It doesn't take a man five hours to do all that," broke in her uncle, with some warmth. Then, as he faced the steady gaze of the girl's brown eyes, he abruptly changed his tone and smiled at her. "Yes, of course we'll wait. We'll give him half an hour's grace, and then – I'll fetch him."

Betty smiled. There was a characteristic snap in the parson's final declaration. The militant character of the man was always very near the surface. He was the kindest and best of men, but anything suggesting lack of straightforwardness in those from whom he had a right to expect the reverse never failed to rouse his ire.

For want of something better to do Betty was carrying out a further rearrangement of the tea-table, and presently her uncle questioned her shrewdly.

"You don't seem very elated at Jim's return?" he said.

"I am more than pleased," she replied gravely.

Parson Tom took up his stand at the window with his back turned.

"When I was engaged to your aunt," he said, smiling out at the valley, "if I had been away for five years and suddenly returned, she would probably have had about three fits, a scene of shrieking hysteria, and gone to bed for a week. By all of which I mean she would have been simply crazy with delight. It must be the difference of temperament, eh?" He turned round and stood smiling keenly across at the girl's serious face.

"Yes, uncle, I don't think I am demonstrative."

"Do you want to marry him?"

The man's eyes were perfectly serious now.

"I am going to marry him – unless – "

"Unless?"

"Unless he refuses to marry me."

"Do you want to marry him, my dear? That was my question."

Her uncle had crossed over to her and stood looking down at her with infinite tenderness in his eyes. She returned his gaze, and slowly a smile replaced her gravity.

"You are very literal, uncle," she said gently. "If you want an absolutely direct reply it is 'Yes.'"

But her uncle was not quite satisfied.

"You – love him?" he persisted.

But this catechism was too much for Betty. She was devoted to her uncle, and she knew that his questions were prompted by the kindest motives. But in this matter she felt that she was entirely justified in thinking and acting for herself.

"You don't quite understand," she said, with just a shade of impatience. "Jim and I are engaged, and you must leave us to settle matters ourselves. If you press me I shall speak the plain truth, and then you will have a wrong impression of the position. I perfectly understand my own feelings. I am not blinded by them. I shall act as I think best, and you must rely on my own judgment. I quite realize that you want to help me. But neither you nor any one else can do that, uncle. Ah, here is auntie," she exclaimed, with evident relief.

Mrs. Chepstow came in. She was hot from her work in the kitchen, where she was operating, with the aid of her "hired" girl, a large bake of cakes for the poorer villagers. She looked at the clock sharply.

"Why, it's half-past five and no tea," she exclaimed, her round face shining, and her gentle eyes wide open. "Where's Jim? Not here? Why, I am astonished. Betty, what are you thinking of? – and after five years, too."

"Betty hasn't got him in proper harness yet," laughed the parson, but there was a look in his eyes which was not in harmony with his laugh.

"Harness? Don't be absurd, Tom." Then she turned to Betty. "Did you tell him five?"

Tom Chepstow picked up his hat, and before the girl could answer he was at the door.

"I'm going to fetch him," he said, and was gone before Betty's protest reached him.

"I do wish uncle wouldn't interfere," the girl said, as her aunt laughed at her husband's precipitate exit.

"Interfere, my dear!" she exclaimed. "You can't stop him. He's got a perverted notion that we women are incapable of taking care of ourselves. He goes through life determined to fight our battles. Determined to help us out when we don't need it. He's helped me 'out' all our married life. He spends his life doing it, and I often wish he'd – he'd leave me 'in' sometimes. I've never seen a man who could upset a woman's plans more completely than your uncle, and all with the best intention. One of these days I'll start to help him out, and then we'll see how he likes it," she laughed

good-humoredly. "You know, if he finds Jim he's sure to upset the boy, and he'll come back thinking he's done his duty by you. Poor Tom, and he does mean so well."

"I know he does, auntie, and that's why we all love him so. Everybody loves him for it, He never thinks of himself. It's always others, and –"

"Yes, my dear, you're right. But all the same I think he's right just now. Why isn't Jim here? Why didn't he come straight away? Why has he been in Malkern five hours before he comes to see you? Betty, my child, I've not said a word all these years. I've left you to your own affairs because I know your good sense; but, in view of the stories that have reached us about Jim, I feel that the time has come for me to speak. Are you going to verify those stories?"

Mrs. Chepstow established her comfortable form in a basket chair, which audibly protested at the weight it was called upon to bear. She folded her hands in her lap, and, assuming her most judicial air, waited for the girl's answer. Betty was thinking of her meeting with Jim on the bridge.

"I shall hear what he has to say," she said decidedly, after a long pause.

Her aunt stared.

"You're going to let him tell you what he likes?" she cried in astonishment.

"He can tell me what he chooses, or – he need tell me nothing."

Her aunt flushed indignantly.

"You will never be so foolish," she said, exasperated.

"Auntie, if Uncle Tom had been away five years, would you ask him for proof of his life all that time?" Betty demanded with some warmth.

The other stirred uneasily.

"That depends," she said evasively.

"No, no, auntie, it doesn't. You would never question uncle. You are a woman, and just as foolish and stupid about that sort of thing as the rest of us. We must take our men on trust. They are men, and their lives are different from ours. We cannot judge them, or, at any rate, we would rather not. Why does a woman cling to a scoundrelly husband who ill-treats her and makes her life one long round of worry, and even misery? Is it because she simply has to? No. It is because he is her man. He is hers, and she would rather have his unkindness than another man's caresses. Foolish we may be, and I am not sure but that we would rather be foolish – where our men are concerned. Jim has come back. His past five years are his. I am going to take up my little story where it was broken five years ago. The stories I have heard are nothing to me. So, if you don't mind, dear, we will close the subject."

"And – and you love him?" questioned the elder woman.

But the girl had turned to the window. She pointed out down the road in the direction of the village.

"Here is uncle returning," she said, ignoring the question. "He's hurrying. Why – he's actually running!"

"Running?"

Mrs. Chepstow bustled to the girl's side, and both stood watching the vigorous form of the parson racing up the trail. Just as he came to the veranda they turned from the window and their eyes met. Betty's were full of pained apprehension, while her aunt's were alight with perplexed curiosity. Betty felt that she knew something of the meaning of her uncle's undignified haste. She did not actually interpret it, she knew it meant disaster, but the nature of that disaster never entered into her thought. Something was wrong, she knew instinctively; and, with the patience of strength, she made no attempt to even guess at it, but simply waited. Her aunt rushed at the parson as he entered the room and flung aside his soft felt hat. Betty gazed mutely at the flaming anger she saw in his blue eyes, as his wife questioned him.

"What is it?" she demanded. "What has happened?"

Parson Tom drew a chair up to the table and flung himself into it.

"We'll have tea," he said curtly.

His wife obediently took her seat.

"And Jim?" she questioned.

The angry blue eyes still flashed.

"We won't wait for him."

Then Betty came to the man's side and laid one small brown hand firmly on his shoulder.

"You – you saw him?" she demanded.

Her uncle shook her hand off almost roughly.

"Yes – I saw him," he said.

"And why isn't he here?" the girl persisted without a tremor, without even noticing his rebuff.

"Because he's lying on his bed at the hotel – drunk. Blind drunk, – confound him."

CHAPTER VII

THE WORK AT THE MILLS

It was sundown. The evening shadows, long drawn out, were rapidly merging into the purple shades of twilight. The hush of night was stealing upon the valley.

There was one voice alone, one discordant note, to jar upon the peace of Nature's repose. It was the voice of Dave's mills, a voice that was never silent. The village, with all its bustling life, its noisy boarding-houses, its well-filled drinking booths, its roystering lumber-jacks released from their day's toil, was powerless to disturb that repose. But the harsh voice of the driving machinery rose dominant above all other sounds. Repose was impossible, even for Nature, where the restless spirit of Dave's enterprise prevailed.

The vast wooden structures of the mills, acres of them, stood like some devouring growth at the very core of Nature's fair body. It almost seemed like a living organism feeding upon all the best she had to yield. Day and night the saws, like the gleaming fangs of a voracious life, tore, devoured, digested, and the song of its labors droned without ceasing.

Controlling, directing, ordering to the last detail, Dave sat in his unpretentious office. Love of the lumberman's craft ran hot in his veins. He had been born and bred to it. He had passed through its every phase. He was a sawyer whose name was historical in the forests of Oregon. As a cant-hook man he had few equals. As foreman he could extract more work from these simple woodsman giants than could those he employed in a similar capacity.

In work he was inevitable. His men knew that when he demanded they must yield. In this direction he displayed no sympathy, no gentleness. He knew the disposition of the lumber-jack. These woodsmen rate their employer by his driving power. They understand and expect to be ruled by a stern discipline, and if this treatment is not forthcoming, their employer may just as well abandon his enterprise for all the work they will yield him.

But though this was Dave in his business, it was the result of his tremendous force of character rather than the nature of the man. If he drove, it was honestly, legitimately. He paid for the best a man could give him, and he saw that he got it. Sickness was sure of ready sympathy, not outspoken, but practical. He was much like the prairie man with his horse. His beast is cared for far better than its master cares for himself, but it must work, and work enthusiastically to the last ounce of its power. Fail, and the horse must go. So it was with Dave. The man who failed him would receive his "time" instantly. There was no question, no excuse. And every lumber-jack knew this and gladly entered his service.

Dave was closeted with his foreman, Joel Dawson, receiving the day's report.

"The tally's eighty thousand," Dawson was saying.

Dave looked up from his books. His keen, humorous eyes surveyed the man's squat figure.

"Not enough," he said.

"She's pressing hard now," came the man's rejoinder, almost defensively.

"She's got to do twenty thousand more," retorted Dave finally.

"Then y'll have to give her more saw room."

"We'll see to it. Meanwhile shove her. How are the logs running? Is Mason keeping the length?"

"Guess he cayn't do better. We ain't handled nothin' under eighty foot."

"Good. They're driving down the river fast?"

"The boom's full, an' we're workin' 'em good an' plenty." The man paused. "'Bout more saw beds an' rollers," he went on a moment later. "Ther' ain't an inch o' space, boss. We'll hev to build."

Dave shook his head and faced round from his desk.

"There's no time. You'll have to take out the gang saws and replace them for log trimming."

Dawson spat into the spittoon. He eyed the ugly, powerful young features of his boss speculatively while he made a swift mental calculation.

"That'll mebbe give us eight thousand more. 'Tain't enough, I guess," he said emphatically. "Say, there's that mill up river. Her as belongs to Jim Truscott. If we had her runnin' I 'lows we'd handle twenty-five thousand on a day and night shift. Givin' us fifty all told."

Dave's eyes lit.

"I've thought of that," he said. "That'll put us up with a small margin. I'll see what can be done. How are the new boys making? I've had a good report from Mason up on No. 1 camp. He's transferred his older hands to new camps, and has the new men with him. He's started to cut on Section 80. His estimate is ten million in the stump on that cut; all big stuff. He's running a big saw-gang up there. The roads were easy making and good for travoying, and most of the timber is within half a mile of the river. We don't need to worry about the 'drive.' He's got the stuff plenty, and all the 'hands' he needs. It's the mill right here that's worrying."

Dawson took a fresh chew.

"Yes, it's the mill, I guess," he said slowly. "That an' this yer strike. We're goin' to feel it – the strike, I mean. The engineers and firemen are going 'out,' I hear, sure."

"That doesn't hit us," said Dave sharply. But there was a keen look of inquiry in his eyes.

"Don't it?" Dawson raised his shaggy eyebrows.

"Our stuff is merely to be placed on board here. The government will see to its transport."

The foreman shook his head.

"What o' them firemen an' engineers in the mill? Say, they're mostly union men, an' – "

"I see." Dave became thoughtful.

"Guess that ain't the only trouble neither," Dawson went on, warming. "Strikes is hell-fire anyways. Ther' ain't no stoppin' 'em when they git good an' goin'. Ther's folk who'd hate work wuss'n pizin when others, of a different craft, are buckin'. I hate strikes, anyway, an' I'll feel a sight easier when the railroaders quits."

"You're alarming yourself without need," Dave said easily, closing his books and rising from his seat. "Guess I'll get to supper. And see you remember I look to you to shove her. Are you posting the 'tally'?"

"Sure. They're goin' up every shift."

A few minutes later the foreman took his departure to hand over to Simon Odd, who ran the mills at night. Dave watched him go. Then, instead of going off to his supper, he sat down again.

Dawson's warning was not without its effect on him, in spite of the easy manner in which he had set it aside. If his mills were to be affected by the strike it would be the worst disaster that could befall – short of fire. To find himself with millions of feet coming down the river on the drive and no possibility of getting it cut would mean absolute ruin. Yes, it was a nasty thought. A thought so unpleasant that he promptly set it aside and turned his attention to more pleasant matters.

One of the most pleasant that occurred to him was the condition of things in the village. Malkern had already begun to boom as the first result of his sudden burst of increased work. Outside capital was coming in for town plots, and several fresh buildings were going up. Addlestone Chicks, the dry-goods storekeeper, was extending his premises to accommodate the enormous increase in his trade. Two more saloons were being considered, both to be built by men from Calford, and the railroad had promised two mails a day instead of one.

Dave thought of these things with the satisfaction of a man who is steadily realizing his ambitions. It only needed his success for prosperity to come automatically to the village in the valley. That was it, his success. This thought brought to his mind again the matter of Jim Truscott's mill, and this, again, set him thinking of Jim himself.

He had seen nothing of Jim since his meeting with him on the bridge, and the memory of that meeting was a dark shadow in his recollection. Since that time two days had passed, two days spent in arduous labor, when there had been no time for more than a passing thought for anything else. He had seen no one outside of his mills. He had seen neither Betty nor her uncle; no one who could tell him how matters were going with the prodigal. He felt somehow that he had been neglectful, he felt that he had wrongfully allowed himself to be swamped in the vortex of the whirling waters of his labors. He had purposely shut out every other consideration.

Now his mind turned upon Betty, and he suddenly decided to take half an hour's respite and visit Harley-Smith's saloon. He felt that this would be the best direction in which to seek Jim Truscott. Five years ago it would have been different.

He rose from his seat and stretched his cumbersome body. Young as he was, he felt stiff. His tremendous effort was making itself felt. Picking up his pipe he lit it, and as he dropped the charred end of the match in the spittoon a knock came at the door. It opened in answer to his call, and in the half-light of the evening he recognized the very man whom he had just decided to seek.

It was Jim Truscott who stood in the doorway peering into the darkened room. And at last his searching eyes rested on the enormous figure of the lumberman. Dave was well in the shadow, and what light came in through the window fell full upon the newcomer's face.

In the brief silence he had a good look at him. He saw that now he was clean-shaven, that his hair had been trimmed, that his clothes were good and belonged to the more civilized conditions of city life. He was good-looking beyond a doubt; a face, he thought, to catch a young girl's fancy. There was something romantic in the dark setting of the eyes, the keen aquiline nose, the broad forehead. It was only the lower part of the face that he found fault with. There was that vicious weakness about the mouth and chin, and it set him pondering. There were the marks of dissipation about the eyes too, only now they were a hundredfold more pronounced. Where before the rounded cheeks had once so smoothly sloped away, now there were puffings, with deep, unwholesome furrows which, in a man of his age, had no right to be there.

Jim was the first to speak, and his manner was almost defiant.

"Well?" he ejaculated.

"Well?" responded Dave; and the newly-opened waters suddenly froze over again.

They measured each other, eye to eye. Both had the memory of their meeting two days ago keenly alive in their thought. Finally Jim broke into a laugh that sounded harshly.

"After five years' absence your cordiality is overwhelming," he said.

"I seem to remember meeting you on the bridge two days ago," retorted Dave.

Then he turned to his desk and lit the lamp. The mill siren hooted out its mournful cry. Its roar was deafening, and answered as an excuse for the silence which remained for some moments between the two men. When the last echo had died out Truscott spoke again. Evidently he had availed himself of those seconds to decide on a more conciliatory course.

"That's nerve-racking," he said lightly.

"Yes, if your nerves aren't in the best condition," replied Dave. Then he indicated a chair and both men seated themselves.

Truscott made himself comfortable and lit a cigar.

"Well, Dave," he said pleasantly, "after five years I return here to find everybody talking of you, of your work, of the fortune you are making, of the prosperity of the village – which, by the way, is credited to your efforts. You are the man of the moment in the valley; you are it!"

Dave nodded.

"Things are doing."

"Doing, man! Why, it's the most wonderful thing. I leave a little dozy village, and I come back to a town thrilling with a magnificent prosperity, with money in plenty for everybody, and on every hand talk of investment, and dreams of fortunes to be made. I'm glad I came. I'm glad I

left that benighted country of cold and empty stomachs and returned to this veritable Tom Tiddler's ground. I too intend to share in the prosperity you have brought about. Dave, you are a wonder."

"I thought you'd come to talk of other matters," said Dave quietly.

His words had ample effect. The enthusiasm dropped from the other like a cloak. His face lost its smile, and his eyes became watchful.

"You mean – "

"Betty," said Dave shortly.

Truscott stirred uneasily. Dave's directness was a little disconcerting. Suddenly the latter leant forward in his chair, and his steady eyes held his visitor.

"Five years ago, Jim, you went away, and, going, you left Betty to my care – for you. That child has always been in my thoughts, and though I've never had an opportunity to afford her the protection you asked of me, it has not been my fault. She has never once needed it. You went away to make money for her, so that when you came back you could marry her. I remember our meeting two days ago, and it's not my intention to say a thing of it. I have been so busy since then that I have seen nobody who could tell me of either her or you, so I know nothing of how your affairs stand. But if you've anything to say on the matter now I'm prepared to listen. Did you make good up there in the Yukon?"

Dave's tone was the tone Truscott had always known. It was kindly, it was strong with honesty and purpose. He felt easier for it, and his relief sounded in his reply.

"I can't complain," he said, settling himself more comfortably in his chair.

"I'm glad," said Dave simply. "I was doubtful of the experiment, but – well, I'm glad. And – ?"

Suddenly Jim sprang to his feet and began to pace the room. Dave watched him. He was reading him. He was studying the nervous movements, and interpreting them as surely as though their meaning were written large in the plainest lettering. It was the same man he had known five years ago – the same, only with a difference. He beheld the weakness he had realized before, but now, where there had been frank honesty in all his movements and expressions, there was a furtive undercurrent which suggested only too clearly the truth of the stories told about him.

"Dave," he burst out at last, coming to a sudden stand in front of him. "I've come to you about Betty. I've come to you to tell you all the regret I have at that meeting of ours on the bridge, and all I said at the time. I want to tell you that I'm a rotten fool and blackguard. That I haven't been near Betty since I came back. I was to have gone to tea that afternoon, and didn't do so because I got blind drunk instead, and when her uncle came to fetch me I told him to go to hell, and insulted him in a dozen ways. I want to tell you that while I was away I practically forgot Betty, I didn't care for her any longer, that I scarcely even regarded our engagement as serious. I feel I must tell you this. And now it is all changed. I have seen her and I want her. I love her madly, and – and I have spoiled all my chances. She'll never speak to me again. I am a fool and a crook – an utter wrong 'un, but I want her. I must have her!"

The man paused breathlessly. His words carried conviction. His manner was passion-swept. There could be no doubt as to his sincerity, or of the truth of the momentary remorse conveyed in his self-accusation.

Dave's teeth shut tight upon his pipe-stem.

"And you did all that?" he inquired with a tenseness that made his voice painfully harsh.

"Yes, yes, I did. Dave, you can't say any harder things to me than I've said to myself. When I drink there's madness in my blood that drives me where it will."

The other suddenly rose from his seat and towered over him. The look on his rugged face was one of mastery. His personality dominated Truscott at that moment in a manner that made him shrink before his steady, luminous eyes.

"How've you earned your living?" he demanded sharply.

"I'm a gambler," came Jim's uneasy reply, the truth forced from him against his will.

"You're a drunkard and a crook?"

"I'm a fool. I told you."

Dave accepted the admission.

"Then for God's sake get out of this village, and write and release Betty from her engagement. You say you love her. Prove it by releasing her, and be a man."

Dave's voice rang out deep with emotion. At that moment he was thinking of Betty, and not of the man before him. He was not there to judge him, his only thought was of the tragedy threatening the girl.

Truscott had suddenly become calm, and his eyes had again assumed that furtive watchfulness as he looked up into the larger man's face. He shook his head.

"I can't give her up," he said obstinately, after a pause.

Dave sat down again, watching the set, almost savage expression of the other's face. The position was difficult; he was not only dealing with this man, but with a woman whose sense of duty and honor was such that left him little hope of settling the matter as he felt it should be settled. Finally he decided to appeal again to the man's better nature.

"Jim," he said solemnly, "you come here and confess yourself a crook, and, if not a drunkard, at least a man with a bad tendency that way. You say you love Betty, in spite of having forgotten her while you were away. On your conscience I ask you, can you wilfully drag this girl, who has known only the purest, most innocent, and God-fearing life, into the path you admit you have been, are treading? Can you drag her down with you? Can you in your utter selfishness take her from a home where she is surrounded by all that can keep a woman pure and good? I don't believe it. That is not the Jim I used to know. Jim, take it from me, there is only one decent course open to you, one honest one. Leave her alone, and go from here yourself. You have no right to her so long as your life is what it is."

"But my life is going to be that no longer," Truscott broke in with passionate earnestness. "Dave, help me out in this. For God's sake, do. It will be the making of me. I have money now, and I want to get rid of the old life. I, too, want to be decent. I do. I swear it. Give me this chance to straighten myself. I know your influence with her. You can get her to excuse that lapse. She will listen to you. My God! Dave, you don't know how I love that girl."

While the lumberman listened his heart hardened. He understood the selfishness, the weakness underlying this man's passion. He understood more than that, Betty was no longer the child she was five years ago, but a handsome woman of perfect moulding. And, truth to tell, he felt this sudden reawakening of the man's passion was not worthy of the name of the love he claimed for it, but rather belonged to baser inspiration. But his own feelings prevented his doing what he would like to have done. He felt that he ought to kick the man out of his office, and have him hunted out of the village. But years ago he had given his promise of help, and a promise was never a light thing with him. And besides that, he realized his own love for Betty, and could not help fearing that his judgment was biased by it. In the end he gave the answer which from the first he knew he must give.

"If you mean that," he said coldly, "I will do what I can for you."

Jim's face lit, and he held out his hand impulsively.

"Thanks, Dave," he cried, his whole face clearing and lighting up as if by magic. "You're a bully friend. Shake!"

But the other ignored the outstretched hand. Somehow he felt he could no longer take it in friendship. Truscott saw the coldness in his eyes, and instantly drew his hand away. He moved toward the door.

"Will you see her to-night?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I can't say. You'll probably hear from her."

At the door the man turned, and Dave suddenly recollected something.

"Oh, by the way," he said, still in his coldest manner, "I'd like to buy that old mill of yours – or lease it. I don't mind which. How much do you want for it?"

Jim flashed a sharp glance at him.

"My old mill?" Then he laughed peculiarly. "What do you want with that?"

The other considered for a moment.

"My mill hasn't sufficient capacity," he said at last. "You see, my contract is urgent. It must be completed before winter shuts down – under an enormous penalty. We are getting a few thousand a day behind on my calculations. Your mill will put me right, with a margin to spare against accidents."

"I see." And the thoughtfulness of Truscott's manner seemed unnecessary. He avoided Dave's eyes. "You're under a penalty, eh? I s'pose the government are a hard crowd to deal with?"

Dave nodded.

"If I fail it means something very like – ruin," he said, almost as though speaking to himself.

Truscott whistled.

"Pretty dangerous, traveling so near the limit," he said.

"Yes. Well? What about the mill?"

"I must think it over. I'll let you know."

He turned and left the office without another word, and Dave stared after him, speechless with surprise and disgust.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE CHURCH BAZAAR

Two days later brought Tom Chepstow's church bazaar. Dave had not yet had the opportunity of interceding with Betty and her uncle on behalf of Jim, but to-day he meant to fulfil his obligations as Tom's chief supporter in church affairs, and, at the same time, to do what he could for the man he had promised to help.

The whole morning the valley was flooded with a tremendous summer deluge. It was just as though the heavens had opened and emptied their waters upon the earth. Dave viewed the prospect with no very friendly eye. He knew the summer rains only too well; the possibilities of flood were well grounded, and just now he had no desire to see the river rise higher than it was at present. Still, as yet there was no reason for alarm. This was the first rain, and the glass was rising.

By noon the clouds broke, and the barometer's promise was fulfilled, so that, by the time he had clad himself in his best broadcloth, he left his office under a radiant sky. In spite of the wet under foot it was a delight to be abroad. The air was fresh and sparkling; the dripping trees seemed to be studded with thousands of diamonds as the poising rain-drops glistened in the blazing sun. The valley rang with the music of the birds, and the health-giving scent of the pine woods was wafted upon the gentlest of zephyrs. Dave's soul was in perfect sympathy with the beauties about him. To him there could be no spot on God's earth so fair and beautiful as this valley.

Passing the mill on his way out of the yards he was met by Joel Dawson, whose voice greeted him with a note of satisfaction in it.

"She's goin' full, boss," he said. "We set the last saws in her this mornin' an' she's steaming hard. Ther' ain't nothin' idle. Ther' ain't a' band' or 'gang' left in her."

And Dave without praise expressed his satisfaction at the rapidity with which his orders had been carried out. This was his way. Dawson was an excellent foreman, and his respect for his "boss" was largely based on the latter's capacity to extract work out of his men. While praise might have been pleasant to him, it would never have fallen in with his ideas of how the mills should be run. His pride was in the work, and to keep his respect at concert pitch it was necessary that he should feel that his "boss" was rather favoring him by entrusting to him the more important part of the work.

Dave passed out of the yards certain that nothing would be neglected in his absence. If things went wrong Dawson would receive no more consideration than a common lumber-jack, and Dawson had no desire to receive his "time."

The Meeting House stood slightly apart from the rest of the village. It was a large, staring frame building, void of all pretentiousness and outward devotional sign. The weather-boarding was painted; at least, it had been. But the winter snows had long since robbed it of its original terra-cotta coloring and left its complexion a drab neutral tint. The building stood bare, with no encompassing fence, and its chief distinctive features were a large doorway, a single row of windows set at regular intervals, and a pitched roof.

As Dave drew near he saw a considerable gathering of men and horses about the doorway and tie-post. He was greeted cordially as he came up. These men were unfeignedly glad to see him, not only because he was popular, but in the hopes that he would show more courage than they possessed, and lead the way within to the feminine webs being woven for their enmeshing.

He chatted for some moments, then, as no one seemed inclined to leave the sunshine for the tempting baits so carefully set out inside the building, he turned to Jenkins Mudley —

"Are you fellows scared of going in?" he inquired, with his large laugh.

Jenkins shook his head shamefacedly, while Harley-Smith, loud and vulgar, with a staring diamond pin gleaming in his necktie, answered for him.

"Tain't that," he said. "His wife's kind o' dep'ty for him. She's in ther' with his dollars."

"And you?" Dave turned on him quickly.

"Me? Oh, I ain't no use for them cirkises. Too much tea an' cake an' kiddies to it for me. Give me a few of the 'jacks' around an' I kind o' feel it homely."

"Say, they ain't got a table for 'draw' in there, have they?" inquired Checks facetiously. "That's what Harley-Smith needs."

Dave smilingly shook his head.

"I don't think there's any gambling about this – unless it's the bran tub. But that is scarcely a gamble. It's a pretty sure thing you get bested over it. Still, there might be a raffle, or an auction. How would that do you, Harley-Smith?"

The saloon-keeper laughed boisterously. He liked being the object of interest; he liked being noticed so much by Dave. It tickled his vulgar vanity. But, to his disappointment, the talk was suddenly shifted into another channel by Checks. The dry-goods merchant turned to Dave with very real interest.

"Talking of 'draw,'" he said pointedly, "you know that shanty right opposite me. It's been empty this year an' more. Who was it lived there? Why, the Sykeses, sure. You know it, it's got a shingle roof, painted red."

"Yes, I know," replied Dave. "It belongs to me. I let Sykes live there because there wasn't another house available at the time. I used to keep it as a storehouse."

"Sure, that's it," exclaimed Checks. "Well, there's some one running a game there at night. I've seen the boys going in, and it's been lit up. Some guy is running a faro bank, or something of the sort. My wife swears it's young Jim Truscott. She's seen him going in for the last two nights. She says he's always the first one in and the last to leave."

"Psha!" Jenkins Mudley exclaimed, with fine scorn. "Jim ain't no gambler. I'd bet it's some crook in from Calford. There's lots of that kidney coming around, seeing the place is on the boom. The bees allus gets around wher' the honey's made."

"Grows," suggested Checks amiably.

Harley-Smith laughed loudly.

"Say, bully for you," he cried sarcastically. "Young Jim ain't no gambler? Gee! I've see him take a thousand of the best bills out of the boys at 'craps' right there in my bar. Gambler? Well, I'd snigger!"

And he illustrated his remark loudly and long.

Dave had dropped out of the conversation at the mention of Jim Truscott's name. He felt that he had nothing to say. And he hoped to avoid being again brought into it. But Jenkins had purposely told him. Jenkins was a rigid churchman, and he knew that Dave was also a strong supporter of Parson Tom's. His wife had been very scandalized at the opening of a gambling house directly opposite their store, and he felt it incumbent upon him to fall in with her views. Therefore he turned again to Dave.

"Well, what about it, Dave?" he demanded. "What are you going to do?"

The lumberman looked him straight in the eye and smiled.

"Do? Why, what all you fellows seem to be scared to do. I'm going into this bazaar to do my duty by the church. I'm going to hand them all my spare dollars, and if there's any change coming, I'll take it in dry-goods."

But the lightness of his tone and smile had no inspiration from his mood. He was angry; he was disappointed. So this was the worth of Jim's promises! This was the man who, in a perfect fever of passion, had said that the old life of gambling and debauchery was finished for him. And yet he had probably left his (Dave's) office and gone straight to a night of heavy gaming, and, if Checks were right, running a faro bank. He knew only too well what that meant. No man who had graduated as a gambler in such a region as the Yukon was likely to run a faro bank straight.

Then a light seemed to flash through his brain, and of a sudden he realized something that fired the blood in his veins and set his pulses hammering feverishly. For the moment it set his thoughts chaotic; he could not realize anything quite clearly. One feeling thrilled him, one wild hope. Then, with stern self-repression, he took hold of himself. This was neither time nor place for such weakness, he told himself. He knew what it was. For the moment he had let himself get out of hand. He had for so long regarded Betty as belonging to Jim; he had for so long shut her from his own thoughts and only regarded her from an impersonal point of view, that it had never occurred to him, until that instant, that there was a possibility of her engagement to Jim ever falling through.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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