He began to see a light, and went on quickly: "I came home rather earlier than usual. I was afraid you'd be nervous—on poor Mavis's tragic death. He was identified beyond recognition."

Mavis! Next door!

The truth forced its way dully to Frances's stupefied brain. She went a little hysterically:

"A boy came here with a message, rather horrible. I was so excited that I did not even look at the address. I—thought it was—you." She clung to him, sobbing and laughing by turns.

Brainard held her in his arms till she had grown quiet.

"And if it had been," he asked at last, gravely, "would it—have mattered—very much to you?" The arms about her slender figure grew suddenly taut. The little line between his brows contracted tensely.

"Oh, Bertie!" was all she said. She looked up. It was enough.

HOPE DEFERRED

By Rose Goodale Dayton

REMEMBER my first pair of breeches?
You can bet! I was born number three,
So when Charlie and Fred had outgrown them,
What was left of 'em just fitted me!

And all the long years of my boyhood
One treasure loomed large in my eyes,
A never-yet-worn pair of trousers—
It's the thing beyond reach that we prize!

Then Charlie he landed a ten-strike
Out West, and had money to burn;
And Fred got a wonderful offer,
Twenty per more than e'er I'd earn.

They said that it paid to be dressy;
It helped them to march with the band,
And when a new suit was in order,
Shipped the old one to me, out of hand.

Pretty soon I had Ruth and the kiddies—
Great Scott! How those chappies did grow!
They were out of knee-pants and in college
In no time! It's costly, you know.

Now Richard this year is a senior,
And Tom is "Fraternity" mad,
But they're generous! Every home visit,
They hand out their old clothes to dad!

And sometimes I wonder a little
If, when the last trumpet resounds,
I'll be glad, while awaiting the summons,
In my grandson's out-worn hand-me-downs!

THE CAVALIER

DECEMBER 14, 1912

Vol. XXIII No. 2

ICE-BOUND HEARTS

A NOVEL—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of "The Honor of the Big Snows," "The Danger Trail," "The Valley of Silent Men," etc.

FOREWORD

AN editor's first obligation is to be honest with his readers. Demonstrations of insincerity, the practise of small deceptions, and the introduction of trickery in a magazine are just as unpardonable as similar practises in special or commercial life.

With these prefatory observations, I beg to inform you that fifteen of the sixty thousand words in "Ice-bound Hearts" appeared under the title of "Little Mystery" in the columns of a magazine that failed in 1910.

The following letter from Mr. Curwood explains fully why the story now appears, rewritten and elongated, under the present title and in one issue of THE CAVALIER.

MY DEAR DAVIS:—

Do you want the best thing you ever saw from me on the North, with the understanding that part of it has been printed before? I am not touting it for any purpose when I say it is my *best*. . . . In its present form it will run at least 60,000 words.

It seems a shame to waste the magazine publication of my strongest book simply because a small part of it was published in a magazine that had the bad grace to expire.

As a 60,000-word novel, why couldn't it be run in THE CAVALIER complete? . . . I leave for the North country about the 1st of September.

Sincerely and faithfully yours,

Owosso, Michigan,
July 8, 1912.

JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD.

To secure James Oliver Curwood's best novel of the North is more than a feather in the cap of THE CAVALIER. It is an aurora borealis.—EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

The Most Terrible Thing in the World.

AT Point Fullerton, one thousand miles straight north of civilization, Sergeant William MacVeigh wrote, with the stub of a pencil between his fingers, the last words of his semiannual report to the commissioner of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police at Regina. He concluded:

I beg to say that I have made every effort to run down Scottie Deane, the murderer. I have not given up hope of finding him, but I believe that he has gone from my territory, and is probably now somewhere within the limits of the Fort Churchill patrol. We have hunted the country for three hundred miles south along the shore of Hudson Bay to Eskimo Point, and as far north as Wagner Inlet. Within three months we have made three patrols west of the bay, traveling 1,600 miles without finding our man or word of him. I respectfully advise a close watch of the patrols south of the Barren Lands.

"There!" said MacVeigh aloud, straightening his rounded shoulders with a groan of relief. "It's done!"

On his bunk, in a corner of the little wind-and-storm-beaten cabin which represented law at the top end of the earth, Private Pelletier lifted a head wearily from his sick-bed, and said:

"I'm bloomin' glad of it, Mac. Now mebby you'll give me a drink of water and shoot that devilish husky that keeps howling every now and then out there, as though death was after me."

"Nervous?" questioned MacVeigh, stretching his strong young frame with another sigh of satisfaction. "What if you had to write this twice a year?" And he pointed at the report.

"It isn't any longer than the letters you wrote to that girl of yours—"

Pelletier stopped short. There was a moment of embarrassing silence. Then he added bluntly, and with a hand reaching out, "I beg your pardon, Mac. It's this fever. I forgot for a moment that—that you two—had broken—"

"That's all right," said MacVeigh, with a quiver in his voice, as he turned for the water.

"You see," he added, returning with a tin cup, "this report is different. When you're writing to the big mogul himself something gets on your nerves. And it has been a bad year with us, Pelly. We fell down on Scottie, and let the raiders from that whaler get away from us. And—by Jo, I forgot to mention the wolves!"

"Put in a P. S.," suggested Pelletier.

"A P. S. to his royal nibs," cried MacVeigh, staring incredulously at his mate. "There's no use of feeling your pulse any more, Pelly. The fever's got you. You're out of your head."

He spoke cheerfully, trying to bring a smile to the other's pale face. Pelletier dropped back with a sigh.

"No—there isn't any use feeling my pulse," he repeated. "It isn't sickness, Mac—not sickness of the ordinary sort. It's in my brain—that's where it is. Think of it—nine months up here and never a glimpse of a white man's face, except yours. Nine months without the sound of a woman's voice. Nine months of just that dead, gray world out there, with the northern lights hissing at us every night like snakes, and the black rocks staring at us as they've stared for a million centuries.

"There may be glory in it, but that's all. We're 'eroes all right, but there's no one knows it but ourselves and the six hundred and forty-nine other men of the Royal Mounted. My God, what I'd give for the sight of a girl's face—for just a moment's touch of her hand! It would drive out this fever, for it's the fever of loneliness, Billy—a sort of madness, and it's splitting my 'ead."

"Tush, tush," said MacVeigh, taking his mate's hand. "Wake up, Pelly. Think of what's coming. Only a few months more of it and we'll be changed. And then—think of what a heaven you'll be entering. You'll be able to enjoy it more than the other fellows, for they've never had this. And I'm going to bring you back a letter—from the little girl—"

Pelletier's face brightened.

"God bless her!" he exclaimed. "There'll be letters from her—a dozen of them. She's waited a long time for me, and she's a true little redcoat to the bottom of her dear heart. You've got my letter safe?"

"Yes."

MacVeigh went back to the rough little table and added still further to his report to the commissioner of the Royal Mounted, in the following words:

Pelletier is sick with a strange trouble in his head. At times I have been afraid he was going mad, and if he lives I advise his transfer south at an early date. I am leaving for Churchill two weeks ahead of the usual time, in order to get medicines. I also wish to add a word to what I said about wolves in my last report. We have seen them repeatedly in packs of from fifty to one thousand. Late this autumn a pack attacked a large herd of traveling caribou fifteen miles in from the bay, and we counted the remains of one hundred and sixty animals killed over a distance of less than three miles. It is my opinion that the wolves kill at least five thousand caribou in this patrol each year.

I have the honor to be, sir,
Your obedient servant,
WILLIAM MACVEIGH, Sergeant,
In charge of detachment.

He folded the report, placed it with other treasures in the water-proof rubber bag which always went into his pack, and returned to Pelletier's side.

"I hate to leave you alone, Pelly," he said. "But I'll make a fast trip of it—four hundred and fifty miles over the ice, and I'll do it in ten days or bust. Then ten days back, mebby two weeks, and you'll have the medicines and the letters. Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" cried Pelletier.

MacVeigh wheeled toward the one wall. Something rose up in MacVeigh's throat and choked him as he gripped Pelletier's hand.

"My God, Bill, is that the sun?" suddenly cried Pelletier.

MacVeigh wheeled toward the one window of the cabin. The sick man tumbled from his bunk. Together they stood for a moment at the window, staring far to the south and east, where a faint red rim of gold shot up through the leaden sky.

"It's the sun," said MacVeigh, like one speaking a prayer.

"The first in four months," breathed Pelletier.

Like starving men, the two gazed through the window. The golden light lingered for a few moments, then died away. Pelletier went back to his bunk.

Half an hour later four dogs, a sledge, and a man were moving swiftly through the dead and silent gloom of arctic day. Sergeant MacVeigh was on his way to Fort Churchill, more than four hundred miles away.

This is the loneliest journey in the world, the trip down from the solitary little wind-beaten cabin at Point Fullerton to Fort Churchill. That cabin has but one rival in the whole of the Northland—the other cabin at Herschel Island, at the mouth of the Firth, where twenty-one wooden crosses mark twenty-one white men's graves. But whalers come to Herschel. Unless by accident, or to break the laws, they never come in the neighborhood of Fullerton. It is at Fullerton that men die of the most terrible thing in the world—loneliness. In the little cabin men have gone mad.

The gloomy truth oppressed MacVeigh as he guided his dog-team over the ice into the south. He was afraid for Pelletier. He prayed that Pelletier might see the sun now and then. On the second day, he stopped at a cache of fish which they had put up in the early autumn for dog-feed. He stopped at a second cache on the fifth day, and spent the sixth night at an

Eskimo igloo at Blind Eskimo Point. Late on the ninth day, he came into Forth Churchill, with an average of fifty miles a day to his credit.

From Fullerton men came in nearer dead than alive, when they made the hazard in winter. MacVeigh's face was raw from the beat of the wind. His eyes were red. He had a touch of runner's cramp. He slept for twenty-four hours in a warm bed without stirring. When he awoke he raged at the commanding officer of the barrack for letting him sleep so long; ate three meals in one, and did up his business in a hurry.

His heart warmed with pleasure when he sorted out of his mail nine letters for Pelletier, all addressed in the same small, girlish hand. There was none for himself—none of the sort which Pelletier was receiving, and the sickening loneliness within him grew almost suffocating.

He laughed softly as he broke a law. He opened one of Pelletier's letters—the last one written, and calmly read it. It was filled with the sweet tenderness of a girl's love, and tears came into his red eyes. Then he sat down and answered it. He told the girl about Pelletier, and confessed to her that he had opened her last letter.

The chief of what he said was that it would be a glorious surprise to a man who was going mad—only he used loneliness in place of madness—if she would come up to Churchill the following spring, and marry him there. He told her that he had opened her letter because he loved Pelletier more than most men loved their brothers. Then he resealed the letter, gave his mail to the superintendent, packed his medicines and supplies, and made ready to return.

On this same day there came into Churchill a half-breed who had been hunting white foxes near Blind Eskimo, and who now and then did scout work for the department. He brought the information that he had seen a white man and a white woman ten miles south of the Maguse River. The news thrilled MacVeigh.

"I'll stop at the Eskimo camp," he said to the superintendent. "It's worth investigating, for I never knew of a white woman north of Sixty in this country. It might be Scottie Deane."

"Not very likely," replied the superintendent. "Scottie is a tall man, straight and powerful. Coujag says this man was no taller than himself, and walked like a hunchback. But if there are white people out there, their history is worth knowing."

The following morning MacVeigh started north. He reached the half dozen igloos which made up the Eskimo village late the third day. Bye-Bye, the chief man, offered him no encouragement. MacVeigh gave him a pound of bacon, and in return for the magnificent present, Bye-Bye told him that he had seen no white people.

MacVeigh gave him another pound, and Bye-Bye added that he had not heard of any white people. He listened with the lifeless stare of a walrus while MacVeigh impressed upon him that he was going inland the next morning to search for white people whom he had heard were there. That night, in a blinding snowstorm, Bye-Bye disappeared from camp.

MacVeigh left his dogs to rest up at the igloo village and swung northwest on snow-shoes with the break of arctic dawn, which was but little better than the night itself. He planned to continue in this direction until he struck the barren, then patrol in a wide circle that would bring him back to the Eskimo camp the next night.

From the first he was handicapped by the storm. He lost Bye-Bye's snow-shoe tracks a hundred yards from the igloos. All that day he searched in sheltered places for signs of a camp or trail. In the afternoon the wind died away, the sky cleared, and in the wake of the calm the cold became so intense that trees cracked with reports like pistol-shots.

He stopped to build a fire of scrub-brush and eat his supper on the edge of the barren, just as the cold stars began blazing over his head. It was a white, still night. The southern timber-line lay far behind him, and to the north there was no timber for three hundred miles. Between those lines there was no life, and so there was no sound. On the west the barren thrust itself down in a long finger ten miles in width, and across that MacVeigh would have to strike to reach the wooded country beyond.

It was over there that he had the greatest hope of discovering a trail. After he had finished his supper he loaded his pipe, and sat hunched close up to his fire, staring out over the barren. For some reason, he was filled with a strange and uncomfortable emotion, and he wished that he had brought along one of his tired dogs to keep him company.

He was accustomed to loneliness; he had laughed in the face of things that had driven other men mad. But to-night there seemed to be something about him that he had never known before, something that wormed its way deep down into his soul and made his pulse beat faster. He thought of Pelletier on his fever-bed, of Scottie Deane, and then of himself. After all, was there much to choose between they three?

A picture rose slowly before him in the bush fire, and in that picture he saw Scottie, the man-hunted man, fighting a great fight to keep himself from being hung by the neck until he was dead; and then he saw Pelletier, dying of the sickness which comes of loneliness—and beyond those two, like a pale cameo appearing for a moment out of gloom, he saw the picture of a face. It was a girl's face, and it was gone in an instant. He had hoped against hope that she would write to him again. But she had failed him.

He rose to his feet with a little laugh, partly of joy and partly of pain, as he thought of the true heart that was waiting for Pelletier. He tied on his snow-shoes and struck out over the barren. He moved swiftly, looking sharply ahead of him. The night grew brighter, the stars more brilliant. The zip, zip, zip of the tails of his snow-shoes was the only sound he heard, except the first faint, hissing monotone of the aurora in the northern skies, which came to him like the shivering glide of steel sledge-runners on hard snow.

In place of sound the night about him began to fill with ghostly life. His shadow beckoned and grimaced ahead of him, and the stunted bush seemed to move. His eyes were alert and questing. Within himself he reasoned that he would see nothing, and yet some unusual instinct moved him to caution. At regular intervals he stopped to listen, and to sniff the air for an odor of smoke. More and more he became like a beast of prey. He left the last bush behind him. Ahead of him the starlit space was now unbroken by a single shadow. Weird whispers came with a low wind that was gathering in the north.

Suddenly he stopped, and swung his rifle into the crook of his arm. Something that was not the wind had come up out of the night. He lifted his fur cap from his ears and listened. He heard it again—faintly—the frosty singing of sledge-runners.

The sledge was approaching from the open barren, and he cleared for action. He took off his heavy fur mittens and snapped them to his belt, replaced them with his light service gloves, and examined his revolver to see that the cylinder was not frozen. Then he stood silent, and waited.

CHAPTER II.

Billy Meets the Woman.

OUT of the gloom a sledge approached slowly. It took form at last in a dim shadow, and MacVeigh saw that it would pass very near to

him. He made out, one after another, a human figure, three dogs, and the toboggan. There was something appalling in the quiet of this specter of life looming up out of the night.

He could no longer hear the sledge, though it was within fifty paces of him. The figure in advance walked slowly and with bowed head, and the dogs and the sledge followed in a ghostly line Human leader and animals were oblivious to MacVeigh, silent and staring in the white night. They were opposite him before he moved.

Then he strode out quickly, with a loud halloo. At the sound of his voice there followed a low cry, the dogs stopped in their traces, and the figure ran back to the sledge. MacVeigh grasped his revolver. Half a dozen long strides and he had reached the sledge. A white face stared at him in the shimmering light. MacVeigh stared back in utter astonishment, for the great, dark, frightened eyes that looked across at him, and the pale face, were the eyes and the face of a woman.

For a moment he was unable to move or speak, and the woman raised her hands and pushed back her fur hood, so that he saw her hair shining in the starlight. She was a white woman. Suddenly he saw something in her face that struck him with a chill, and he looked down at the thing under his hand. It was a long, rough box. He drew back a step.

"Good God!" he said. "Are you alone?"

She bowed her head, and he heard her voice in a half-sob.

"Yes—alone."

He stepped quickly to her side. "I am Sergeant MacVeigh, of the Royal Mounted," he said gently. "Tell me, where are you going—and how does it happen that you are out here in the barren—alone?"

Her hood had fallen upon her shoulder, and she lifted her face full to MacVeigh. The stars shone in her eyes. They were wonderful eyes, and now they were filled with pain. And it was a wonderful face—to MacVeigh, who had not seen a white woman's face for nearly a year. She was young—so young that in the pale glow of the night she looked almost like a girl—and in her eyes and mouth, and the upturn of her chin, there was something so like that other face of which he had dreamed that he reached out and took her two hesitating hands in his own, and asked again:

"Where are you going; and why are you out here—alone?"

"I am going—down there," she said, turning her head toward the timber-line. "I am going—with him—my husband—"

Her voice choked her, and, drawing her hands suddenly from him, she went to the sledge and stood facing him. For a moment there was a glow of defiance in her eyes, as though she feared him, and was ready to fight for herself and her dead. The dogs slunk in at her feet, and MacVeigh saw the gleam of their naked fangs in the starlight.

"He died three days ago," she finished quietly, "and I am taking him back to my people, down on the Little Seal."

"It is two hundred miles," said MacVeigh, looking at her as if she were mad. "You will die."

"I have traveled two days," replied the woman. "I am going on."

"Two days—across the barren!"

MacVeigh looked at the box, grim and terrible in the ghostly radiance that fell upon it. Then he looked at the woman. She had bowed her head upon her breast, and her shining hair fell loose and disheveled. He saw the pathetic droop of her tired shoulders, and knew that she was crying.

In that moment a thrilling warmth flooded every fiber of his body, and the glory of this that had come to him from out of the barren held him mute. To him woman was all that was glorious and good. The pitiless loneliness of his life had placed them next to angels in his code of things, and before him now he saw all that he had ever

dreamed of in the love and loyalty of womanhood and of wifehood.

The bowed little figure before him was facing death for the man she had loved, and who was dead. In a way, he knew that she was mad. And yet her madness was the madness of a devotion that was beyond fear; of a faithfulness that made no measure of storm and cold and starvation, and he was filled with a desire to go up to her as she stood crumpled and exhausted against the box; to take her close in his arms and tell her that of such a love he had built for himself the visions which had kept him alive in his loneliness. She looked pathetically like a child.

"Come, little girl," he said. "We'll go on. I'll see you safely on your way to the Little Seal. You mustn't go alone. You'd never reach your people alive. My God, if I were he—"

He stopped at the frightened look in the white face she lifted to him.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing—only it's hard for a man to die and lose a woman like you," said MacVeigh. "There—let me lift you upon the box."

"The dogs cannot pull the load," she objected. "I have helped them—"

"If they can't, I can," he laughed softly, and with a quick movement he picked her up and seated her on the sledge. He stripped off his pack and placed it behind her, and then he gave her his rifle. The woman looked straight at him with a tense, white face as she placed the weapon across her lap.

"You can shoot me if I don't do my duty," said MacVeigh. He tried to hide the happiness that came to him in this companionship of woman, but it trembled in his voice.

He stopped suddenly, listening.

"What was that?"

"I heard nothing," said the woman. Her face was deadly white. Her eyes had grown black.

MacVeigh turned with a word to the dogs. He picked up the end of the babiche rope with which the woman had assisted them to drag their load, and set off across the barren. The presence of the dead had always been oppressive to him, but to-night it was otherwise. His fatigue of the day was gone, and, in spite of the thing he was helping to drag behind him, he was filled with a strange elation—he was in the presence of a woman.

Now and then he turned his head to look at her. He could feel her behind him, and the sound of her low voice when she spoke to the dogs was like music to him. He wanted to burst forth in the wild song with which he and Pelletier had kept up their courage in the little cabin, but he throttled his desire, and whistled instead. He wondered how the woman and the dogs had dragged the sledge. It sank deep in the soft drift-snow, and taxed his strength. Now and then he paused to rest, and at last the woman jumped from the sledge and came to his side.

"I am going to walk," she said. "The load is too heavy."

"The snow is soft," replied MacVeigh. "Come."

He held out his hand to her, and with the same strange white look in her face the woman gave him her own. She glanced back uneasily toward the box, and MacVeigh understood. He pressed her fingers a little tighter, and drew her nearer to him. Hand in hand they resumed their way across the barren. MacVeigh said nothing, but his blood was running like fire through his body. The little hand he held trembled and started uneasily. Once or twice it tried to draw itself away, and he held it closer. After that it remained submissively in his own, warm and thrilling. Looking down he could see the profile of the woman's face.

A long, shining tress of her hair had freed itself from under her hood, and the light wind lifted it so that it fell across his arm. Like a thief he raised it to his lips, while the woman looked straight ahead to where the timber-line began to show in a thin, black streak. His cheeks burned, half with shame,

half with tumultuous joy. Then he straightened his shoulders and shook the floating trees from his arm.

Three-quarters of an hour later they came to the first of the timber. He still held her hand. He was still holding it, with the brilliant starlight falling upon them, when his chin shot suddenly into the air again, alert and fighting, and he cried softly:

"What was that?"

"Nothing," said the woman. "I heard nothing—unless it was the wind in the trees."

She drew away from him. The dogs whined and slunk close to the box. Across the barren came a low, wailing wind.

"The storm is coming back," said Billy. "It must have been the wind that I heard."

CHAPTER III.

"In Honor of the Living."

FOR a few moments after uttering those words Billy stood silent, listening for a sound that was not the low moaning of the wind from out on the barren. He was sure that he had heard it—something very near, almost at his feet, and yet it was a sound which he could not place or understand. He looked at the woman. She was gazing steadily at him.

"I hear it now," she said. "It is the wind. It has—frightened me. It makes such terrible sounds at times—out on the barren. A little while ago—I thought—I heard—a child crying—"

Billy saw her clutch a hand at her throat, and there were both terror and grief in the eyes that never for an instant left his face. He understood. She was almost ready to give way under the terrible strain of the barren. He smiled at her, and spoke in a voice that he might have used to a little child.

"You are tired, little girl?"

"Yes—yes—I am tired—"

"And hungry and cold?"

"Yes."

"Then we will camp in the timber."

They went on until they came to a growth of spruce, so dense that it formed a shelter from both snow and wind, with a thick carpet of brown needles under foot. They were shut out from the stars, and in the darkness MacVeigh began to whistle cheerfully. He unstrapped his pack and spread out one of his blankets close to the box, and wrapped the other about the woman's shoulders.

"You sit here while I make a fire," he said.

He piled up dry needles over a precious bit of his birch-bark, and struck a flame. In the glowing light he found other fuel, and added to the fire until the crackling blaze leaped as high as his head. The woman's face was hidden, and she looked as though she had fallen asleep in the warmth of the fire. For half an hour MacVeigh dragged in fuel until he had a great pile of it in readiness.

Then he forked out a deep bed of burning coals and soon the odor of coffee and frying bacon aroused his companion. She raised her head and threw back the blanket with which he had covered her shoulders. It was warm where she sat, and she took off her hood, while he smiled at her companionably from over the fire. Her reddish brown hair tumbled about her shoulders, rippling and glistening in the fire-glow, and for a few moments she sat with it falling loosely about her, with her eyes upon MacVeigh. Then she gathered it between her fingers, and Billy watched her while she divided it into shining strands and plaited it into a big braid.

"Supper is ready," he said. "Will you eat it there?"

She nodded, and for the first time she smiled at him. He brought bacon and bread and coffee and other things from his pack, and placed them on a folded blanket between them. He sat opposite her, cross-legged. For the first time he noticed that her eyes were

blue, and that there was a flush in her cheeks. The flush deepened as he looked at her, and she smiled at him again.

The smile, the momentary drooping of her eyes, set his heart leaping, and for a little while he was unconscious of taste in the food he swallowed. He told her of his post away up at Point Fullerton, and of Pelletier, who was dying of loneliness.

"It's been a long time since I've seen a woman like you," he confided. "And it seems like heaven. You don't know how lonely I am!" His voice trembled. "I wish that Pelletier could see you—just for a moment," he added. "It would make him live again."

Something in the soft glow of her eyes urged other words to his lips.

"Mebby you don't know what it means not to see a white woman in—in—all this time," he went on. "You won't think that I've gone mad, will you—or that I'm saying or doing anything that's wrong? I'm trying to hold myself back, but I feel like shouting, I'm that glad. If Pelletier could see you—"

He reached suddenly in his pocket and drew out the precious packet of letters. "He's got a girl down south—just like you," he said. "These are from her. If I get 'em up in time, they'll bring him round. It's not medicine he wants. It's woman—just a sight of her, and sound of her, and a touch of her hand."

She reached across and took the letters. In the firelight he saw that her hand was trembling.

"Are they—married?" she asked.

"No, but they're goin' to be," he cried triumphantly. "She's the most beautiful thing in the world, next to—"

He paused, and she finished for him.

"Next to one other girl—who is yours."

"No, I wasn't going to say that. You won't think I mean wrong, will you, if I tell you? I was going to say next to—you. For you've come out of the blizzard—like an angel to give me new hope. I was sort of broke when you came. If you disappeared now, and I never saw you again, I'd go back and fight the rest of my time out, an' dream of pleasant things. Gawd—do you know—a man has to be put up here before he knows that life isn't the sun an' the moon an' the stars an' the air we breathe. It's woman—just woman."

He was returning the letters to his pocket. The woman's voice was clear and gentle. To Billy it rose like sweetest music above the crackling of the fire and the murmuring of the wind in the spruce-tops.

"Men like you—ought to have a woman to care for," she said. "He was like that."

"You mean—" His eyes sought the long, dark box.

"Yes—he was like that."

"I know how you feel," he said, and for a moment he did not look at her. "I've gone through—a lot of it. Father an' mother and a sister. Mother was the last, and I wasn't much more than a kid—eighteen, I guess—but it don't seem much more than yesterday. When you come up here, and you don't see the sun for months, nor a white face for a year or more, it brings up all those things pretty much as though they happened only a little while ago."

"All of them are—dead?" she asked.

"All but one. She wrote to me for a long time, and I thought she'd keep her word. Pelly—that's Pelletier—thinks we've just had a misunderstanding, and that she'll write again. I haven't told him that she turned me down to marry another fellow. I didn't want to make him think any unpleasant things about his own girl. You're apt to do that when you're almost dying of loneliness."

The woman's eyes were shining. She leaned a little toward him.

"You should be glad," she said. "If she turned you down—she wouldn't have been worthy of you—afterward."

She wasn't a true woman. If she had been her love wouldn't have grown cold because you were away. It mustn't spoil your faith, because that is—beautiful."

He had put a hand into his pocket again, and drew out now a thin package wrapped in buckskin. His face was like a boy's.

"It might have—if I hadn't met you," he said. "I'd like to let you know—some way—what you've done for me. You—and this."

He had unfolded the buckskin and gave it to her. In it were the big, blue petals and dried stem of a blue flower.

"A blue flower!" she said.

"Yes. You know what it means. The Indians call it *I-o-waka*, or something like that, because they believe that it is the flower-spirit of the purest and most beautiful thing in the world. I have called it—woman."

He laughed, and there was a joyous sort of note in the laugh.

"You may think me a little mad," he said, "but do you care if I tell you about that blue flower?"

The woman nodded. There was a little quiver at her throat which Billy did not see.

"I was away up on the Great Bear," he said, "and for ten days and ten nights I was in camp—alone—laid up with a sprained ankle. It was a wild and gloomy place, shut in by barren ridge-mountains, with stunted black spruce all about, and those spruce were haunted by owls that made my blood run cold nights. The second day I found company. It was a blue flower. It grew close to my tent, as high as my knee, and during the day I used to spread out my blanket close to it, and lie there and smoke. And the blue flower would wave on its slender stem, an' bob at me, an' talk in sign language that I imagined I understood.

"Sometimes it was so funny and vivacious that I laughed, and then it seemed to be inviting me to a dance. And at other times it was just beautiful and still, and seemed listening to what the forest was saying—and once or twice—I thought—it might be praying. Loneliness makes a fellow foolish, you know. With the going of the sun my blue flower would always fold its petals and go to sleep like a little child tired out by the day's play, and after that I would feel terribly lonely.

"But it was always awake again when I rolled out in the morning. At last the time came when I was well enough to leave. On the ninth night I watched my blue flower go to sleep for the last time. Then I packed. The sun was up when I went away the next morning, and from a little distance I turned and looked back. I suppose I was foolish and weak for a man, but I felt like crying. Blue flower had taught me many things I had not known before. It had made me think. And when I looked back it was in a pool of sunlight, waving at me!

"It seemed to me that it was calling—calling me back—and I ran to it—and picked it from the stem—and it has been with me ever since that hour. It has been my Bible an' my comrade, an' I've known it was the spirit of the purest and the most beautiful thing in the world—a woman. I—" His voice broke a little. "I—I may be foolish, but I'd like to have you take it, an' keep it—always—for me."

He could see now the quiver of her lips as she looked across at him.

"Yes, I will take it," she said. "I will take it, and keep it—always."

"I've been keeping it—for a woman—somewhere," he said. "Foolish idea, wasn't it? And I've been telling you all this, when I wanted to hear what happened back there, and what you are going to do when you reach your people. Do you mind—telling me?"

"He died—that's all," she replied. "I promised to take him back—to my people. And when I get there—I don't know—what I shall—do—"

She caught her breath. A low sob broke from her lips.

"You don't know—what you will do—"

Billy's voice sounded strange, even to himself. He rose to his feet, and looked down into her upturned face, his hands clenched, his body trembling with the fight he was making. Words came to his lips, and were forced back again—words which almost won in their struggle to tell her again that she had come to him from out of the barren like an angel; that within the short space since their meeting he had lived a lifetime, and that he loved her as no man had ever loved a woman before. Her blue eyes looked at him questioningly as he stood above her.

And then he saw the thing which for a moment he had forgotten—the long, rough box at the woman's back. His fingers dug deeper into his palms, and with a gasping breath he turned away.

A hundred paces back in the spruce, he had found a bare rock with a red bakneesh vine growing over it. With his knife he cut off an armful, and when he returned with it into the light of the fire, the bakneesh glowed like a mass of crimson flowers. The woman had risen to her feet, and looked at him speechlessly as he scattered the vine over the box. He turned to her, and said softly:

"In honor of the dead!"

The color had faded from her face, but her eyes shone like stars. Billy advanced toward her, with his hands reaching out. But suddenly he stopped and stood listening. After a moment he turned and asked again:

"What was that?"

"I heard the dogs—and the wind," she replied.

"It's something cracking in my head, I guess," said MacVeigh. "It sounded like—"

He passed a hand over his forehead, and looked at the dogs huddled in deep sleep beside the sledge. The woman did not see the shiver that passed through him. He laughed cheerfully, and seized his ax.

"Now for the camp," he announced. "We're going to get the storm within an hour."

On the box the woman carried a small tent, and he pitched it close to the fire, filling the interior two feet deep with cedar and balsam boughs. His own silk service-tent he put up back in the deeper shadows of the spruce. When he had finished he looked questioningly at the woman, and then at the box.

"If there is room—I would like it in there—with me," she said, and while she stood with her face to the fire he dragged the box into the tent. Then he piled fresh fuel upon the fire, and came to bid her good night. Her face was pale and haggard now, but she smiled at him, and to MacVeigh she was the most beautiful thing in the world. Within himself he felt that he had known her for years and years, and he took her hands and looked down into her blue eyes, and said almost in a whisper:

"Will you forgive me if I'm doing wrong? You don't know how lonesome I've been—and how lonesome I am—and what it means to me to look once more into a woman's face. I don't want to hurt you, and I'd—I'd—" his voice broke a little—"I'd give him back life if I could, just because I've seen you, and know you, and—and love you."

She started, and drew a quick, sharp breath that came almost in a low cry.

"Forgive me, little girl," he went on. "I may be a little mad, I guess I am. But I'd die for you, and I'm going to see you safely down to your people—and—and—I wonder—I wonder—if you'd kiss me good night—"

Her eyes never left his face. They were dazzlingly blue in the firelight. Slowly she drew her hands away from him, still looking straight into his eyes, and then she placed them against each of his arms, and lifted her face to him. Reverently he bent and kissed her.

"God bless you!" he whispered.

For hours after that he sat beside the fire. The wind came up stronger across the barren; the storm broke

fresh from the north; the spruce and the balsam wailed over his head, and he could hear the moaning sweep of the blizzard out in the open spaces. But the sounds came to him now like a new kind of music, and his heart throbbed and his soul was warm with joy as he looked at the little tent wherein there lay sleeping the woman whom he loved.

He still felt the warmth of her lips; he saw again and again the blue softness that had come for an instant into her eyes, and he thanked God for the wonderful happiness that had come to him. For the sweetness of the woman's lips and the greater sweetness of her blue eyes told him what life held for him now.

A day's journey to the south was an Indian camp. He would take her there, and would hire runners to carry up Pelletier's medicines and his letters. Then he would go on—with the woman—and he laughed softly and joyously at the glorious news which he would take back to Pelletier a little later. For the kiss burned on his lips, the blue eyes smiled at him still from out of the firelit gloom, and he knew nothing but hope.

It was late—almost midnight—when he went to bed. With the storm wailing and twisting more fiercely about him, he fell asleep. And it was late when he awoke. The forest was filled with a moaning sound. The fire was low. Beyond it the flap of the woman's tent was still down, and he put on fresh fuel quietly, so that he would not awaken her. He looked at his watch, and found that he had been sleeping for nearly seven hours. Then he returned to his tent to get the things for breakfast. Half a dozen paces from the door-flap he stopped in sudden astonishment.

Hanging to his tent, in the form of a great wreath, was the red bakneesh which he had cut the night before, and over it, scrawled in charcoal on the silk, there stared at him the crudely written words:

"In honor of the living."

With a low cry, he sprang back toward the other tent; and then, as sudden as his movement, there flashed upon him the significance of the bakneesh wreath. The woman was saying to him what she had not spoken in words. She had come out in the night, while he was asleep, and had hung the wreath where he would see it in the morning.

The blood rushed warm and joyous through his body, and with something which was not a laugh, but which was an exultant breath from the soul itself, he straightened himself and his hand fell in its old trick to his revolver-holster. It was empty.

He dragged out his blankets; but the weapon was not between them. He looked into the corner where he had placed his rifle; that, too, was gone. His face grew tense and white as he walked slowly beyond the fire to the woman's tent. With his ear at the flap he listened. There was no sound within—no sound of movement, of life, of a sleeper's breath; and, like one who feared to reveal a terrible picture, he drew back the flap. The balsam bed which he had made for the woman was empty, and across it had been drawn the big rough box. He stepped inside. The box was open—and empty, except for a mass of worn and hard-packed balsam boughs in the bottom. In another instant the truth burst in all its force upon MacVeigh. The box had held life, and the woman—

Something on the side of the box caught his eyes. It was a folded bit of paper, pinned where he must see it. He tore it off, and staggered with it back into the light of day. A low, hard cry came from his lips as he read what the woman had written to him:

May God bless you for being good to me. In the storm we have gone—my husband and I. Word came to us that you were on our trail, and we saw your fire from out on the barren. My husband made the box for me, to keep me from cold and storm. When we saw you, we changed places, and so you met me with my dead. He could have killed you—a dozen times, but you were good to me, and so you live. Some day may God give you a good woman who will love you as I love him. He killed a man, but killing is not always murder. We have taken your weapons, and the storm will cover our trail. But you would not follow. I know that. For you know what it means to love a woman, and so you know what life means to a woman when she loves a man.

MRS. ISOBEL DEANE.

CHAPTER IV.

The Man-Hunters.

LIKE one dazed by a blow, Billy read once more the words which Isobel Deane had left for him. He made no sound after that first cry that had broken from his lips, but stood looking into the crackling flames of the fire until a sudden lash of the wind whipped the note from between his fingers and sent it scurrying away in a white volley of fine snow.

The loss of the note awoke him to action. He started to pursue the bit of paper, then stopped and laughed. It was a short, mirthless laugh—the kind of a laugh with which a strong man covers pain. He returned to the tent again and looked in. He flung back the tent-flaps so that the light could enter and he could see into the box. A few hours before that box had hidden Scottie Deane, the murderer. And she was his wife!

He turned back to the fire, and he saw again the red bakneesh hanging over his tent-flap and the words she had scrawled with the end of a charred stick, "In honor of the living." That meant him. Something thick and uncomfortable rose in his throat, and a blur that was not caused by snow or wind filled his eyes. She had made a magnificent fight. And she had won. And it suddenly occurred to him that what she had said in the note was true, and that Scottie Deane could easily have killed him.

The next moment he wondered why he had not done that. Deane had taken a big chance in allowing him to live. They had only a few hours' start of him, and their trail could not be entirely obliterated by the storm. Deane would be hampered in his flight by the presence of his wife. He could still follow and overtake them. They had taken his weapons—but this would not be the first time that he had gone after his man without weapons.

Swiftly the reaction worked in him. He ran beyond the fire, and circled quickly until he came upon the trail of the outgoing sledge. It was still quite distinct. Deeper in the forest it could be easily followed. Something fluttered at his feet. It was Isobel Deane's note.

He picked it up, and again his eyes fell upon those last words that she had written: "But you would not follow. I know that. For you know what it means to love a woman, and so you know what life means to a woman when she loves a man."

That was why Scottie Deane had not killed him. It was because of the woman—and she had faith in him. This time he folded the note and placed it in his pocket, where the blue flower had been. Then he went slowly back to the fire.

"I told you I'd give him back his life—if I could," he said. "And I guess I'm going to keep my word!" He fell into his old habit of talking to himself—a habit that comes easily to one in the big, open spaces—and he laughed as he stood before the fire and loaded his pipe. "If it wasn't for her," he added, thinking of Scottie Deane; "Gawd—if it wasn't for her!"

He finished loading his pipe and lighted it, staring off into the thicker spruce forest into which Scottie and his wife had fled. The entire force was on the lookout for Scottie Deane. For more than a year he had been as elusive as the little white ermine of the woods. He had outwitted the best men in the service, and his name was known to every man of the Royal Mounted from Calgary to Herschel Island.

There was a price on his head and fame for the man who captured him. Those who dreamed of promotions also dreamed of Scottie Deane, and as Billy thought of these things something that was not the man-hunting instinct rose in him, and his blood warmed with a strange feeling of brotherhood. Scottie Deane was more than an outlaw to him now, more than a mere man. Hunted like a rat, chased from place to place, he must be more than those things for a woman like Isobel Deane still to cling to. He recalled the gentleness of her voice, the sweetness of her face, the tenderness of her blue eyes, and for the first time the thought came to him that such a woman could not love a man who was wholly bad.

And she did love him. A twinge of pain came with that truth, and yet with it a thrill of pleasure. Her loyalty was a triumph—even for him. She had come to him like an angel out of the storm, and she had gone from him like an angel. He was glad. A living, breathing reality had taken the place of the dream-vision in his heart—a woman who was flesh and blood, and who was as true and as beautiful as the blue flower he had carried against his breast.

In that moment he would have liked to grip Scottie Deane by the hand, because he was her husband and because he was man enough to make her love him. Perhaps it was Deane who had hung the wreath of bakneesh on his tent and who had scribbled the words in charcoal. And Deane surely knew of the note his wife had written. The feeling of brotherhood grew stronger in Billy, and the thought of their faith in him filled him with a strange elation.

The fire was growing low, and he turned to add fresh fuel. His eyes caught sight of the box in the tent, and he dragged it out. He was about to throw it on the fire when he hesitated and examined it more closely. How far had they come, he wondered. It must have been from the other side of the barren, for Deane had built the box to protect Isobel from the fierce winds of the open.

It was built of light, dry wood, hewn with a belt-ax, and the corners were fastened with babiche cord made of caribou skin, in place of nails. The balsam that had been placed in it for Isobel was still in the box, and Billy's heart beat a little more quickly as he drew it out. It had been Isobel's bed. He could see where the balsam was thicker, where her head had rested. With a sudden, breathless cry he thrust the box on the fire.

He was not hungry, but he made himself a pot of coffee and drank it. Until now he had not observed that the storm was growing steadily worse. The thick, low-hanging spruce broke the force of it. Beyond the shelter of the forest he could hear the roar of it as it swept through the thin scrub and open spaces of the edge of the barren. It recalled him once more to Pelletier.

In the excitement of Isobel's presence and the shock and despair that had followed her flight he had been guilty of partly forgetting Pelletier.

By the time he reached the Eskimo igloos there would be two days lost. Those two days might mean everything to his sick comrade. He jumped to his feet, felt in his pocket to see that the letters were safe, and began to arrange his pack. Through the trees there came now fine, white volleys of blistering snow. It was like the hardest granulated sugar. A sudden blast of it stung his eyes, and, leaving his pack and tent, he made his way anxiously toward the more open timber and scrub.

A few hundred yards from the camp he was forced to bow his head against the snow volleys and pull the broad flaps of his cap down over his cheeks and ears. A hundred yards more and he stopped, sheltering himself behind a gnarled and stunted banskian. He looked out into the beginning of the open. It was a white and seething chaos, into which he could not see the

distance of a pistol-shot. The Eskimo igloos were twenty miles across the barren, and Billy's heart sank. He could not make it.

No man could live in the storm that was sweeping straight down from the Arctic, and he turned back to the camp. He had scarcely made the move when he was startled by a strange sound coming with the wind. He faced the white blur again, a hand dropping to his empty pistol-holster. It came again, and this time he recognized it. It was a shout—a man's voice. Instantly his mind leaped to Deane and Isobel. What miracle could be bringing them back?

A shadow grew out of the twisting blur of the storm. It quickly separated itself into definite parts—a team of dogs—a sledge—three men. A minute more and the dogs stopped in a snarling tangle as they saw Billy. Billy stepped forth. Almost instantly he found a revolver leveled at his breast.

"Put that up, Bucky Smith!" he called. "If you're looking for a man, you've found the wrong one!"

The man advanced. His eyes were red and staring. His pistol-arm dropped as he came within a yard of Billy.

"By ——, it's you, is it, Billy MacVeigh!" he exclaimed.

His laugh was harsh and unpleasant. Bucky was a corporal in the service, and when Billy had last heard of him he was stationed at Nelson House. For a year the two men had been in the same patrol, and there was bad blood between them. Billy had never told of a certain affair down at Norway, the knowledge of which at headquarters would have meant Bucky's disgraceful retirement from the force. But he had called Bucky out in fair fight and had whipped him within an inch of his life.

The old hatred burned in the corporal's eyes as he stared into Billy's face. Billy ignored the look, and shook hands with the other men. One of them was a Hudson Bay Company's driver, and the other was Constable Walker, from Churchill.

"Thought we'd never live to reach shelter," gasped Walker as they shook hands. "We're out after Scottie Deane, and we ain't losing a minute. We're going to get him, too. His trail is so hot we can smell it. My God, but I'm bushed!"

The dogs, with the company man at their head, were already making for the camp. Billy grinned at the corporal as they followed.

"Had a pretty good chance to get me—if you'd been alone, didn't you, Bucky?" he asked in a voice that Walker did not hear. "You see, I haven't forgotten your threat."

There was a steely hardness behind his laugh. He knew that Bucky Smith was a scoundrel whose good fortune was that he had never been found out in some of his evil work. In a flash his mind traveled back to that day at Norway when Rousseau, the half-Frenchman, had come to him from a sick-bed to tell him that Bucky had ruined his young wife. Rousseau, who should have been in bed with his fever, died two days later.

Billy could still hear the taunt in Bucky's voice when he had cornered him with Rousseau's accusation, and the fight had followed. The thought that this man was now close after Isobel and Deane filled him with a sort of rage, and as Walker went ahead he laid a hand on Bucky's arm.

"I've been thinking about you of late, Bucky," he said. "I've been thinking a lot about that affair down at Norway, an' I've been kicking myself for not reporting it. I'm going to do it—unless you cut a right angle track to the one you're taking. I'm after Scottie Deane myself."

In the next breath he could have cut out his tongue for having uttered the words. A gleam of triumph shot into Bucky's eyes.

"I thought we was right," he said. "We sort of lost the trail in the storm. Glad we found you to set us right.

How much of a start of us has he and that squaw that's traveling with him?"

Billy's mittened hands clenched fiercely. He made no reply, but followed quickly after Walker. His mind worked swiftly. As he came in to the fire he saw that the dogs had already dropped down in their traces, and that they were exhausted. Walker's face was pinched, his eyes half closed by the sting of the snow.

The driver was half stretched out on the sledge, his feet to the fire. In a glance he had assured himself that both dogs and men had gone through a long and desperate struggle in the storm. He looked at Bucky, and this time there was neither rancor nor threat in his voice when he spoke.

"You fellows have had a hard time of it," he said. "Make yourselves at home. I'm not overburdened with grub, but if you'll dig out some of your own rations I'll get it ready while you thaw out."

Bucky was looking curiously at the two tents.

"Who's with you?" he asked.

Billy shrugged his shoulders. His voice was almost affable.

"Hate to tell you who was with me, Bucky," he laughed. "I came in late last night, half dead, and found a half-breed camped here—in that silk tent. He was quite chummy—mighty fine chap. Young fellow, too—almost a kid. When I got up this morning"—Billy shrugged his shoulders again, and pointed to his empty holster—"every thing was gone—dogs, sledge, extra tent, even my rifle and automatic. He wasn't quite bad, though, for he left me my grub. He was a funny cuss, too. Look at that!"

He pointed to the bakneesh wreath that still hung to the front of his tent.

"'In honor of the living,'" he read aloud. "Just a sort of a reminder, you know, that he might have hit me on the head with a club if he'd wanted to." He came nearer to Bucky, and said good-naturedly: "I guess you've got me beat this time, Bucky. Scottie Deane is pretty safe from me, wherever he is. I haven't even got a gun!"

"He must have left a trail," remarked Bucky, eying him shrewdly.

"He did—out there!"

As Bucky went to examine what was left of the trail Billy thanked Heaven that Deane had placed Isobel on the sledge before he left camp. There was nothing to betray her presence. Walker had unlaced their outfit, and Billy was busy preparing a meal when Bucky returned. There was a sneer on his lips.

"Didn't know you was that easy," he said. "Wonder why he didn't take his tent! Pretty good tent, isn't it?"

He went inside. A minute later he appeared at the flap, and called to Billy.

"Look here!" he said. And there was a tremble of excitement in his voice. His eyes were blazing with an ugly triumph. "Your half-breed had pretty long hair, didn't he?"

He pointed to a splinter on one of the light tent-poles. Billy's heart gave a sudden jump.

A tress of Isobel's long, loose hair had caught in the splinter, and a dozen golden brown strands had remained to give him away. For a moment he forgot that Bucky Smith was watching him.

He saw Isobel again, as she had last entered the tent, her beautiful hair flowing in a firelit glory about her, her eyes still filled with tender gratitude. Once more he felt the warmth of her lips, the touch of her hand, the thrill of her presence near him. Perhaps these emotions covered any suspicious movement or word by which he might otherwise have betrayed himself. By the time they were gone he had recovered himself, and he turned to his companion with a low laugh.

"It's a woman's hair all right, Bucky. He told me all sorts of nice things about a girl back home. They must have been true."

The eyes of the two men met unflinchingly. There was a sneer on Bucky's lips; Billy was smiling.

"I'm going to follow this Frenchman after we've had a little rest," said the corporal, trying to cover a certain note of excitement and triumph in his voice. "There's a woman traveling with Scottie Deane, you know—a white woman—and there's only one other north of Churchill. Of course you're anxious to get back your stolen outfit?"

"You bet I am!" exclaimed Billy, concealing the effect of the bull's-eye shot Bucky had made. "I'm not particularly happy in the thought of reporting myself stripped in this sort of way. The half-breed will hang to thick cover, and it won't be difficult to follow his trail."

He saw that Bucky was a little taken back by his ready acquiescence, and before the other could reply he hurried out to join Walker in the preparation of breakfast. He made a gallon of tea, fried bacon, and brought out and toasted his own stock of frozen bannock.

He made a second kettle of tea while the others were eating, and shook out the blankets in his own tent. Walker had told him that they had traveled nearly all night.

"Better have an hour or two of sleep before you go on," Billy invited.

The driver's name was Conway. He was the first to accept Billy's invitation. When he had finished eating Walker followed him into the tent. When they were gone Bucky looked hard at Billy.

"What's your game?" he asked.

"The golden rule, that's all," replied Billy, proffering his tobacco. "The half-breed treated me square and made me comfortable, even if he did take his pay afterward. I'm doing the same."

"And what do you expect to take—afterward?"

Billy's eyes narrowed as he returned the other's searching look.

"Bucky, I didn't think you were quite a fool," he said. "You've got a little decency in your hide, haven't you? A man might as well be in jail as up here without a gun. I expect you to contribute one—when you go after the half-breed, you or Walker. He'll do it if you won't. Better go in with the others. I'll keep up the fire."

Bucky rose sullenly. He was still suspicious of Billy's hospitality, but at the same time he could see the strength of Billy's argument and the importance of the price he was asking. He joined Walker and Conway.

Fifteen minutes later Billy approached the tent and looked in. The three men were in the deep sleep of exhaustion. Instantly Billy's actions changed. He had thrown his pack outside the tent to make more room, and he quickly slipped a spare blanket in with his provisions. Then he entered the other tent, and a flush spread over his face, and he felt his blood grow warmer.

"You may be a fool, Billy MacVeigh," he laughed softly. "You may be a fool—but we're going to do it!"

Gently he disentangled the long, silken strands of golden brown from the tent pole. He wound the hair about his fingers, and it made a soft and shining ring. It was all that he would ever possess of Isobel Deane, and his breath came more quickly as he pressed it for a moment to his rough and storm-beaten face. He put it in his pocket, carefully wrapped in Isobel's note, and then once more he went back to the tent in which the three men were sleeping. They had not moved.

Walker's holster was within reach of his hand. For a moment the temptation to reach out and pluck the gun from it was strong. He pulled himself away. He would win in this fight with Bucky as surely as he had won in the other, and he would win without theft. Quickly he threw his pack over his shoulder, and struck the trail made by Deane in his flight. On his snowshoes he followed it in a long, swift pace. A hundred yards from the camp he looked back for an instant.

Then he turned, and his face was grim and set.

"If you've got to be caught it's not going to be by that outfit back there, Mr. Scottie Deane," he said to himself. "It's up to yours truly, and Billy MacVeigh is the man who can do the trick if he hasn't got a gun!"

CHAPTER V.

Billy Follows Isobel.

FROM the first Billy could see the difficulty with which Deane and his dogs had made their way through the soft drifts of snow piled up by the blizzard. In places, where the trees had thinned out, Deane had floundered ahead and pulled with the team. Only once in the first mile had Isobel climbed from the sledge, and that was where traces, toboggan and team had all become mixed up in the snow-covered top of a fallen tree.

The fact that Deane was compelling his wife to ride added to Billy's liking for the man. It was probable that Isobel had not gone to sleep at all after her hard experience on the barren, but had lain awake, planning with her husband until the hour of their flight. If Isobel had been able to travel on snow-shoes, Billy reasoned, that Deane would have left the dogs behind, for in the deep, soft snow he could have made better time without them, and snow-shoe trails would have been obliterated by the storm hours ago.

As it was, he could not lose them. He knew that he had no time to waste if he wished to make sure of beating out Bucky and his men. The suspicious corporal would not sleep long. While he had the advantage of being comparatively fresh, Billy's snow-shoes were smoothing and packing the trail, and the others, if they followed, would be able to travel a mile or two an hour faster than he. That Bucky would follow, he did not doubt for a moment. The corporal was already half-convinced that Scottie Deane had made the trail from camp, and that the hair he had found entangled in the splinter on the tent-pole belonged to the outlaw's wife. And Scottie Deane was too big a prize to lose.

Billy's mind worked rapidly as he bent more determinedly to the pursuit. He knew that there were only two things that Bucky could do under the circumstances. He would either follow after him with Walker and the driver, or he would come alone. If Walker and Conway accompanied him, the fight for Scottie Deane's capture would be a fair one, and the man who first put manacles about the outlaw's wrists would be the victor. But if he left his two companions in camp, and came after him alone—

The thought was not a pleasant one. He was almost sorry that he had not taken Walker's gun. If Bucky came alone it would be with but one purpose in mind — to make sure of Scottie Deane by squaring up with him first.

Billy was sure that he had measured the man right, and that he would not hesitate to carry out his old threat by putting a bullet into him at the first opportunity. The storm would cover up any foul work he might accomplish, and his reward would be Scottie Deane —unless Deane played too good a hand for him.

At thought of Deane Billy chuckled. Until now he had not taken him fully into consideration, and suddenly it dawned upon him that there was a bit of humor, as well as tragedy in the situation. He cheerfully conceded to himself that for a long time Deane had proved himself a better man than either Bucky or he, and that, after all, he was the man who held the situation well in hand even now.

He was well armed. He was as cautious as a fox, and would not be caught napping. And yet this thought filled Billy with satisfaction rather than fear. Deane would be more than a match for Bucky alone if he failed in beating out the corporal. But if he did beat him out—

Billy's lips set grimly, and there was a hard light in his eyes as he glanced back over his shoulder. He would not only beat him out, but he would capture Scottie Deane. It would be a game of fox against fox, and he would win. No one would ever know why he was playing the game as he had planned to play it. Bucky would never know. Down at headquarters they would never know. And yet, deep down in his heart, he hoped and believed that Isobel would guess and understand.

To save Deane, to save Isobel, he must keep them out of the hands of Bucky Smith, and to do that he must make them his own prisoners. It would be a terrible ordeal at first. A picture of Isobel rose before him, her faith and trust in him broken, her face white and drawn with grief and despair, her blue eyes flashing at him—hatred. But he felt now that he could stand those things. One moment—the final moment—when she would understand, and know that he had remained true, would repay him for what he might suffer.

He traveled swiftly for an hour, and paused then to get his wind where the partly covered trail dipped down into a frozen swamp. Here Isobel had climbed from the sledge and had followed in the path of the toboggan. In places where the spruce and balsam were thick overhead, Billy could make out the imprints of her moccasins. Deane had led the dogs in the darkness of the storm, and twice Billy found the burned ends of matches, where he had stopped to look at his compass. He was striking a course almost due west.

At the farther edge of the swamp the trail struck a lake, and straight across this Deane had led his team. The worst of the storm was over now. The wind was slowly shifting to the south and east, and the fine, steely snow had given place to a thicker and softer downfall. Billy shuddered as he thought of what this lake must have been a few hours before, when Isobel and Deane had crossed it, in the thick blackness of the blizzard that had swept it like a hurricane.

It was half a mile across the lake, and here, fifty yards from shore, the trail was completely covered. Billy lost no time by endeavoring to find signs of it in the open, but struck directly for the opposite timber-line, and swung along in the shelter of the scrub forest. He picked up the trail easily. Half an hour later he stopped. Spruce and balsam grew thick about him, shutting out what was left of the wind. Here Scottie Deane had stopped to build a fire. Close to the charred embers was a mass of balsam boughs, on which Isobel had rested. Scottie had made a pot of boiling tea, and had afterward thrown the grounds on the snow.

The warm bodies of the dogs had made smooth, round pits in the snow, and Billy figured that the fugitives had rested for a couple of hours. They had traveled eight miles through the blizzard without a fire, and his heart was filled with a sickening pain as he thought of Isobel Deane and the suffering he had brought to her. For a few moments there swept over him a revulsion for that thing which he stood for—the law.

More than once in his experience he had thought that its punishment had been greater than the crime. Isobel had suffered—and was suffering—far more than if Deane had been captured a year before, and hanged. And Deane himself had paid a penalty greater than death in being a witness of the suffering of the woman who had remained loyal to him. Billy's heart went out to them in a low, yearning cry as he looked at the balsam bed and the black char of the fire.

He wished that he could give them life, and freedom, and happiness, and his hands clenched tightly as he thought that he was willing to surrender everything, even to his own honor, for the woman whom he loved.

then you must kiss little Isobel. And we don't want you to go very far away—again. It's so lonely—terribly lonely all by ourselves in the city—and we're glad you've come, so glad—"

Her voice broke in a sobbing whisper, and as Billy opened his great, ragged arms and caught her to him, he heard that whisper again, saying: "We're glad—glad—glad you've come back to us."

"And I—may—stay?"

She raised her face, glorious in its welcome.

"If you want me—still," she whispered, "you may stay."

At last he believed. But he could not speak. He bent his face to hers, and for a moment they stood thus, while from behind the shrubbery there came the sound of little Isobel's joyous laughter.

(The end.)

THE ELOPERS

A SERIAL

BY ROTHVIN WALLACE

CHAPTER I.

Sida Elopes.

IF Sida Stirling hadn't dropped her gloves in a taxicab; if Peachy La Folatre hadn't looked on the wine when it was pale amber, and hadn't told tales out of school to the wrong person; if Ricky Fanshawe hadn't entertained a party of bachelor friends on the eve of an important event in his life, to wit: his intended marriage; if Tom Gamble hadn't tried to put a finishing touch on his already tarnished reputation — if, indeed, these things had not happened at the unfortunate psychological moments when they did, there would be no occasion for this biographical exposition of their adventures.

But in the words of the lamented bard, "the best laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft aglee," and the hypothetical conjunction of two letters plays a more important part in our lives than most of us imagine. If—there it goes again—one might venture to paraphrase the immortal versifier of Avon, one might observe that all the world's an if, and the people only interrogation points.

But to begin at the beginning—no, not at the beginning exactly, because beginnings usually are stupid.

We'll begin, then, with an interesting anticlimax, after Sida Stirling — called "Lady" by her mother—had been winged, retrieved, bagged, roped, and hog-tied by that merciless little heart-hunter—Cupid. Sida just knew that she loved Tom Gamble better than anything else in the world. She was equally positive that Tom, in turn, adored her quite as profoundly, and that the fact that she was a ten-million-dollar heiress didn't make the least bit of difference to him.

She even wished, at times, that she had only matrimony, without patrimony, to look forward to — just to prove to her shallow, mercenary world that Tom loved her for her own sweet self alone.

Which sentiments will lead the most casual reader to surmise that Sida was young. She was. She cast an introspective thought across the span of three years that separated her from maturity—and her share of her late father's estate. And she dreamed dreams that the interim should be spent in a rose-covered, vine-clad cottage, with Tom. She even harbored the notion that, when she should come into possession of her wealth, she might gladden the hearts—and fatten the pockets — of the directors of some worthy charity, and continue to sip the nectar that the kind gods should bestow on her pastoral dove-cote.

Which goes to prove that Sida also was romantic. Likewise, it would seem to indicate that Tom had no more of the world's goods than were necessary to the adequate maintenance of a glaringly lurid career.

Well, Sida was not a bit sorry that Tom was poor, nor that he posed as a horrible example before all the other adolescent males of her set. She felt that kind fate, in some way, would provide the rose-covered cottage, and then she meant to reform Tom. Yes, she should make that her life work—reforming Tom. The fact that all of her friends were opposed to him only made her the more determined to marry him and make a new man of him.

She had almost divine confidence in the charm and potency of the marriage-tie. Which is further evidence that Sida was young and romantic — and foolish.

Of course, being romantic, there was only one way for Sida to gain the joy of her heart. Indubitably, she and Tom must elope. She was a little bit timorous at first, but when Tom pointed out to her that the only daughter of the great Peter Stirling could not be married secretly in New York, she saw the wisdom of his argument.

In the first place, it would be necessary, under the law, for her to accompany him when he should go for the marriage license; and always those horrid newspaper reporters were lurking about where they were not wanted, eager to print things that were nobody's business. Sida saw at once that a great deal of notoriety must follow her marriage in New York. Ergo, she and Tom would slip off to Philadelphia, where they were not known, there to be bound together with the bonds of Hymen. And to make secrecy even more secure, they would enter the City of Brotherly Love by separate trains.

Oh, it was a fine scheme, although by no means a remarkable one. Only a dénouement not down on the books was remarkable; but Sida, not being gifted with powers of divination, had no suspicion that fate had stacked the deck, and was holding a joker up his sleeve.

Consequently, one blissful morning found Sida Stirling, with the assistance of a capable maid, costuming herself with particular care.

"I'll wear the taupe," Margot," Sida had said, with a strained effort to appear natural and nonchalant.

"*Oui, mademoiselle,*" Margot had answered. Whereupon she brought forth slippers, stockings, and other mysterious things in that ultra fashionable, pinkish-gray shade. And when each had found its proper place on her trim little figure, Sida gazed through violet eyes at quite a satisfactory reflection in the cheval glass. She patted a wastrel blond curl to give it the appearance of careless abandon, and turned toward the door.

"*Mademoiselle* ees beautiful!" exclaimed Margot, clasping her own slender hands rapturously.

"Yes, I think I'll do," remarked Sida smugly. Which would indicate that Sida also possessed the feminine—and masculine — foible of vanity, and had an ego all her own. She flashed a farewell glance at the mirror, and glided from the room on trembling legs.

In the hall, Sida met her devoted mother, a fifty-year-old matron, who dressed like twenty and looked like thirty—when one did not observe too