

North-West ROMANCES



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A Complete Novel of the Yukon

- TUNDRA GOLD** Fred L. Nebel 3
"Gold stamped!" The whisper raced on blizzard wings. Cameo Dowd, five-ace king, Burke, the Chechako, and the Girl from Outside follow it to feud's end where the Grim Reaper waited for pay-off.

Three Thrilling Snowland Novelets

- NO LAW BELOW ZERO** A. deHerries Smith 42
Corporal McCree mushed along a blood-specked murder trail—lured deeper and deeper into the frozen Bering by the rumor of a beautiful ice-girl and the ghostly crew of a long-lost mystery ship.
- BUCCANEER OF THE BARRENS** Sewell P. Wright 76
Eau Blanc was forbidden territory, a Barrenland fur-pirate's guarded wilderness. But the grinning young trapper raised his war-flag there, daring Desjoie's Cree killers to come and blast him out.
- SPOILERS OF PARADISE VALLEY** Roger Daniels 106
Through the blizzard's endless wrath stumbled grim-jawed Peters of the Mounted, seeking a green Eden amid that white wilderness, where a Golden Goddess ruled a lost race of savage blue-eyed warriors.

Four Fast Northwest Short Stories

- BLOOD BROTHER OF THE SNOW-GODS** Sgt. Dan O'Rourke 33
To the Klingat huts of far-off Hoonyah, Cramer sailed to claim his torture-stake bride.
- OUTLAW OF THE SNOWS** H. S. M. Kemp 64
Ahead lay freedom. Yet law-tagged Billy Nelson turned back to side a Redcoat foe.
- HOBNAIL JUSTICE** Charles Nelson 72
Giant-powder booms—and a timber-topper gambles his life on a swaying death-spar.
- FLAMING RIVER** Edwin M. Sampson 96
Fugitives both! One from the leaping tongues of death—the other from Mounty law.



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*A Novelet of the
Snow Country*

Buccaneer of the Barrens

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

Eau Blanc was forbidden territory, a Barrenland fur-pirate's gauded wilderness. But the grinning young trapper raised his war-flag there, daring Desjoie's Cree killers to come and blast him out.

IT was hard going, even with the current in their favor, for the two big freighters were loaded until they had but three or four inches free-board amidships. There were three dogs in each canoe, lying asleep up near the bow, and under and behind them were packs of food, cook-

ing utensils, a roll of roofing paper, several axes, a rifle apiece, a tangle of rusted steel traps of various sizes—all the paraphernalia of a trapper going into the bush for the winter.

The man in the stern of the foremost canoe was Barry West; a tall, rangy chap

with wiry muscles that didn't show but that proved their presence by the powerful, tireless thrust of the paddle Barry wielded. His face was weatherbeaten, but still young, and his gray eyes seemed constantly to twinkle as though at some inward, amusing thought.

Shorty Miller, in the second canoe, was in some ways the antithesis of Barry. Shorty was stocky, almost plump, but like Barry he had the muscles of a deer; flat, powerful, untiring. His round, chubby face was forever dismal, however, and his blue eyes fostered an undying sadness.

The two canoes swung around a sharp turn in the river, and Barry turned his head and pointed with a flashing paddle to a figure on the far bank.

"By the looks, somebody's cooking dinner over there. What do you say we go over and chin awhile? Maybe he can give us a line on this Eau Blanc country. And besides," he added ingenuously, "I'm hungry!"

"It might be a good idea," agreed Shorty, and accordingly the two canoes headed for the distant cooking fire.

The man squatting beside the fire hailed them cheerily as they neared the shore, and in a few minutes the partners had their own meal spattering on the fire, and were chatting with the stranger.

"You guys goin' up around Eau Blanc post?" he exclaimed. "Well, all I got to say is you've tackled a mansized job."

"Why?" asked Barry surprised. "We heard they were bringing some mighty fine fur out of the country up around there, and that there was plenty of room. What's the matter with it?"

"I don't know, rightly. I've only been working through here the last two years, and I haven't got the straight of it. But as I get it, this Sadi Desjoie, who runs the post there—damn free-trader, you know—wants to keep the country straight Indian. Bunch of Crees up there, and if my info is right he sells them bootleg booze and cheats them right and left. That's why he doesn't want any whites cluttering up the scenery."

"But why don't the authorities do something about it? They're pretty hard on anybody selling booze to the Indians."

"The Indians are all in with him. Nobody has been able to get the goods on him.

Same way with the white men he runs out of the country. None of them ever got anything on Sadi himself, although they had a hell of a flock of suspicions.

"The country's big, and there's lot of room, so most everybody just stays away rather than run into trouble. Sadi's the cock of the roost, I guess. Looks like you two are askin' for trouble, breezin' in there!"

"Trouble follows me like my shadow," sighed Shorty. "I might 'a known there was a catch in it somewhere."

They chatted for half an hour, stretched their legs with a little walk along the shore, and then resumed their journey, their late companion wishing them a somewhat pessimistic farewell.

IT was in this fashion that Shorty and Barry received their first intimation of what lay before them. Three days later they arrived at their destination.

It was pretty country, low and rolling for the most part, with now and then a high ridge, or a stretch of muskeg or tamarack swamp. They passed Eau Blanc post, but did not go near. It was on the distant shore of a large lake, unnamed on the map they had, and they had resolved that they would neither trouble the factor of the post, nor brook trouble from him. All they asked was to be left strictly alone.

A few days' cruising located some likely looking territory, and they set to work at once. There was wood to be cut, a headquarters camp to be built, some lay-over camps to be put up if possible in the limited time available, some trails to be blazed, toboggans and sledges to be built—starting a trap line in new territory is by no means an overnight job. The flurries of snow that filled the air every few days kept spurring them on, for they realized that in a week or so snow would fall that would not leave the ground until late in the spring, and then their activities would be much hampered.

At last the main camp was completed. Barry stood back and surveyed the squat, sturdy log building with approving eyes.

"Well," said Barry, seating himself on a convenient stump, "there we are."

"Yes. But how long'll we be there? That's the question." Shorty was not inclined to optimism.

"Until we get damn' good and ready to leave!" Barry's answer was vigorous and uncompromising.

"You know what they told us about this Sadi what's-his-name fellow," said Shorty, shaking his head. "A bad egg from the word go, with no use for white men. He's made other fellows so sick of the country they've been glad to pull out right in the middle of the season."

"Old down-in-the-mouth!" chuckled Barry. "We've been here—how long is it now? Two-three weeks, anyway, and we haven't been bothered. Got our trap lines all located, headquarters camp already built, and nothing done so far to drive us out. Looks to me—"

"Looks to me like you spoke a mite too soon," interrupted Shorty. "We got company, and by his looks he's bearin' us no key to the city, or anything."

He nodded toward the lake in gloomy triumph. Barry turned leisurely to survey their visitor. He was a full-blooded Cree, Barry guessed; unusually tall for an Indian, and with keen, dark eyes that held no friendly gleam.

SILENTLY the two partners awaited their visitor's approach. Barry filled his pipe with casual ease, lit it carefully, and ground the match under foot. The Indian paused in front of the two men, staring down at them with contemplative eyes.

"*Jou!*" said Barry pleasantly.

"*Jou!*" replied the stranger shortly. The very fact that he did not reply with the usual cheery "*Jou!*" of the friendly Indian was significant.

Shorty and Barry waited patiently; Shorty dolefully, and Barry with smiling contentment.

"You think trapum here?" asked the Indian at length.

Barry shook his head, and sent a blue cloud of smoke rolling out into the frosty air.

"We don't think a thing about it," he replied in Cree. "We're *going* to trap here, my friend."

"You speak my language? Good! But do not call me a friend. Little John is no friend of yours. I come to tell you you must go."

"Why? Nobody's trapping over this territory, and this is a free country, is it

not? Then why shouldn't we trap here?"

"Not for white trappers. You are not wanted here. You go back to some other country. You will save yourself much trouble. That is my word to you."

"Listen." Barry rose to his full height of a shade over six feet. There was no smile on his face now, and his gray eyes were as chilly as the leaden clouds overhead. "I don't know who you are and why you're here, and I don't care. But there's one thing sure, and that is we're going to stay here until we get plenty ready to go, and that won't be any time this winter. I take it that Desjoie sent you here; I understand he thinks himself bad medicine and the big boss in these parts. Well, you tell him for us that we're sticking around—permanently, if we like the place. Now run along and report."

The Indian shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "I tell you like a friend—it be much better for you to go. Very much better. But—I will tell Sadi what you say."

He turned on his heel and strode rapidly down the trail toward the lake. Shorty watched the retreating figure with brooding eyes.

"You see? Trouble right off the bang! This is a hell of a life, if you ask me."

"Well, I don't know but what you're right," said Barry, grinning to himself. "It might be a good idea to haul out while the goin's good. He looked as though he meant business."

Shortly glanced suspiciously at his partner. "You mean that?"

"I'll go if you will."

Shorty sighed dismally and shook his head.

"You know damn well I wouldn't back down!" he said dolefully. "We got chips in the game now—" he jerked his head toward the camp—"and we'll have to call his bluff."

"I'm not so sure," said Barry thoughtfully, "that it's a bluff we're calling. But we'll stick, just the same, eh?"

"We'll stick," nodded Shorty.

II

THEY had finished their work none too soon, for the next morning it was snowing. The small, compact flakes drove downward with that intense, merciless in-

sistence that is typical of a big snow in the Northland.

"Well, she's here," said Barry after a brief inspection of the sky and the thermometer nailed to the outside of the cabin. "This is winter, my son!"

"Yes. And as soon as it stops snowing, the thing for us to do is to give the new toboggan a tryout, and take a run down to the H. B. post for some more grub. Save making a trip later, when we'll be busy—unless you want to patronize this Sadi what's-his-name, and run the chance of being poisoned."

"Toss you for the job," offered Barry, spinning a coin in the air suggestively.

"Tails!"

Barry flipped the coin, and it fell ringing on the table.

"Heads!" he declared, chuckling. "It's your job, Shorty."

"I knew it!" said Shorty, sighing. "I never won a toss in my life. Never expect to."

Barry chuckled again, and the two busied themselves checking up their stores, and making out a list of what they would need to last them through the winter.

The snow continued to fall steadily and without intermission until the morning of the third day. Then it came off cold and clear, and the wintry sun shone down on a white and silent world of mighty beauty. The man who can gaze upon the virgin forests of the far north when the first big snow is upon them, and remain unmoved, is a man without a soul.

The fourth day the snow had packed a bit, and Shorty started, taking all six dogs, for he would have a heavy load coming back. He knelt at the rear of the toboggan and cracked his long whip close to the ear of the lead dog.

"Let's go!" he shouted. "Mush, you mangy brutes!"

The splendid, tawny bodies plunged forward, the seemingly tangled harness drew taut. With a rush they started over the firm crust, yapping joyously.

"Looks like a Derby team!" called Barry. "See you some more, Shorty!"

"About a week! So long!" The dogs swung upon the lake and disappeared.

Barry turned back into the cabin, a little sorry that he was not in Shorty's place. The

dogs were fresh, and while not yet hardened would make easy work of the light toboggan. Coming back it would not be so easy; perhaps there would be more snow, and a trail to break, but Barry was a true bushman, and loved the country and the life of those who wring their living from it. He pulled his light, small trail shoes from the pole rafters of the camp, and put in new lashings. Barry used the quick and simple "squaw hitch," so this was not a difficult matter, and in a few minutes he was outside, rifle in hand, gazing around with meditative eyes.

"I'll make a few sets now, just to keep busy," he mused. "Might pick up an odd fur or two, and anyway I need the exercise."

In his pack he had all that was necessary; a coil of brass snare wire, a big chunk of frozen meat, and a tightly corked, squat bottle containing a white powder like flour—strychnine. Contrary to the usual idea the trapper of the far north uses steel traps but seldom, and then largely in the spring, when ratting. The dead-fall, the snare with an unfailling balance pole to draw the noose tight, and the quick-acting poison—these are the things upon which the bushman depends.

The webs felt clumsy and awkward for the first mile or so, but it was not long before Barry found his snow legs, and was swinging along in the easy, bent-kneed stride of the man who walks nearly half his life on the indispensable webs of the snow country.

BARRY was making a marten set near the top of a ridge when he was startled by a high-pitched cry of fear, that cut suddenly through the hovering white silence.

A woman had uttered that appealing cry. Instantly Barry was on his feet and running in the direction from which the cry had come, calling out as he ran. But he received no answer; after that one brief scream of terror, all was silence. The white, huge silence of the Northland.

It took Barry but a moment, however, to locate the girl who had cried out. He saw her snowshoe tracks, saw where she had clambered to the top of a drift, only to have the treacherous snow slide with her, plunging her down the side of the ridge,

so steep at this point to be almost precipitous. Tangled in her webs, she had half-rolled, half stumbled down the steep decline, to bring up at the bottom against a huge, jagged boulder with a force that had evidently knocked consciousness, if not life itself, from her slight body. She lay, a pathetic little huddle, motionless and silent, crumpled against the rock.

Barry jerked out of his webs with two quick motions, and ploughed through the snow to the girl. A rapid examination proved she was still alive. Although her white and scarlet toque was stained a darker red in one place near the back of her head, Barry decided that the wound was merely superficial. It would be but a matter of minutes before the girl regained consciousness.

Quickly he removed her snowshoes, and carried her upon the flat top of the boulder. She was dressed as a man of the north country would be dressed: heavy belted mackinaw, and mackinaw pants, stagged off at the bottom and tucked into heavy white woolen socks. Light, soft moccasins, coming just above the ankle, completed the ensemble. It is a convenient and becoming costume.

She was not beautiful, not even pretty, but there was an elfin attractiveness to her features that was oddly appealing. Her brows were level, and her nose short, straight, and well modeled. Her mouth was full, but not too full, and quirked upward at the corners, even now. A tiny, rebellious wisp of raven black hair had stolen out from under her toque, and her skin was smooth and creamy; the complexion that most properly goes with black hair and dark brown eyes.

All these things Barry noticed as he worked. It took him but a minute to get a fire blazing on the rock, and a minute or two more to gather a sizable fuel supply. From his pack he took the little tin pail he used for "b'iling the kettle," and filled it with clean snow.

While the snow was melting, he carefully removed the toque, and examined the wound. As he had thought, it was but a little scalp wound, now well clotted. He decided it would be best not to meddle with it. As he was replacing the toque, the girl groaned a little, and rolled her head from side to side impatiently.

"All right, miss," said Barry cheerfully. "Everything's fine, and I'll have a cup of tea ready for you in a moment—"

THE girl looked up at him, her calm, level gaze studying him as though he were some strange insect. Again Barry felt her antagonism, and a strange coldness grew around his heart.

"I thank you for what you have done," she said, slowly, her gaze now fixed on the distant landscape, "but—I would prefer not to be further indebted to you."

"You—you won't drink the tea I have made for you?" asked Barry incredulously, as the full meaning of the girl's remarks at last sank home.

"I—I would prefer—to be under no further obligation to you," repeated the girl very softly.

"But why?" cried Barry.

"Because," said the girl, and for the moment angry, contemptuous fire flashed in her eyes, "I know you—know what you are."

"I don't understand," replied Barry wretchedly. "But certainly I shall not force my simple hospitality upon you." He picked up the pail and threw the steaming contents out onto the snow.

"Perhaps you will understand when I tell you I am the daughter of Sadi Desjoie," said the girl, rising to her feet.

"*What?*" The word burst from him explosively. This splendid creature the daughter of Sadi Desjoie?

"I thought that would explain things to you!" said the girl coolly, and with a little nod of dismissal she jumped down the rock and started putting on her webs.

For a moment Barry hesitated. He was about to insist upon a further explanation of her attitude, but his stubborn pride came to the rescue. With a shrug, he too leaped from the rock, and started ploughing through the snow to the top of the ridge, where he had left his own racquets when he went to her rescue.

There was a frown on his face, and a dull ache in his heart, but he did not turn to look back. If the girl felt that way about it, that was her business.

He had no means of knowing that the girl's soft and wondering gaze followed him until he disappeared from sight, and that there was an ache around her heart too.

III

IN a desultory, half-hearted way, Barry worked at his little trap line until Shorty returned. Always, it seemed, the girl's elfin features came before him when his mind wandered from his task, and his brain was a whirligig of questions he asked himself but could not answer.

How did it happen that a man like Sadi Desjoie had a daughter like that? Why had she refused his hospitality even to the extent of a cup of tea? Why had she looked at him with that flash of contempt in her eyes? What had Sadi told her about him? What—

He would break off his useless cogitations with an angry shrug, but always the flood of questions poured back upon him. Barry was glad when Shorty returned, so that he could have someone to talk to.

Shorty's trip had been uneventful. There had been good going all the way, and the dogs had behaved beautifully.

"Anything happen around here while I was away?" asked Shorty when he had finished his brief account of the trip.

"Why—nothing much," said Barry hastily, and changed the subject.

The next day they started putting out their lines, each taking a team of three dogs. For several days they went peacefully about their work, and had just about decided that Sadi's warning, as conveyed to them by the Indian, Little John, was an empty threat. And then the first blow fell. Barry came one evening to the lay-over camp, to find it a mere black rectangle of charred timbers.

It could not possibly have been set from Barry's own fire, for it had been four days since he had been there, and the ashes were still warm. There was only one conclusion possible, and that was the little camp had been deliberately fired, and that meant Sadi had at last declared war.

Barry went back into the bush and made camp. There were ugly lines around his mouth, and a light in his gray eyes few men had ever seen there, and always to their regret. Like many habitually genial souls, Barry, when aroused, was as savage and unforgiving as an otter.

On his way back to the main camp, Barry found further evidences of Sadi's ac-

tivities. Every trap had been either sprung or robbed of its catch. The lines about Barry's mouth grew grimmer and grimmer.

As he approached the clearing in which the main camp was located, he saw a strange team of five dogs standing in the trail that led to the lake. His own dogs noticed the stranger at the same moment, and sent up a yapping challenge. Barry silenced them with an angry word, but it was too late.

The door of the camp flew open and a man dashed out, running for the waiting dog team.

"Halt!" shouted Barry, jerking his gun from under the lashing ropes.

The man paid no heed, except to run faster.

Barry got his gun clear just as the man sprang onto the empty toboggan, and the dogs leaped forward.

With an oath Barry brought his rifle to position and fired. As he did so, one side of the fugitive's toboggan hit the shoulder of a snow-hidden rock, and swerved sharply to one side. That was all that saved him.

The bullet hit the rock and went whining shrilly off into space. Before Barry, quick as he was, could work the belt of his rifle and fire again, the stranger was out of sight.

Barry cursed silently and hurried up to the camp.

As he opened the door, a cloud of smoke puffed in his face, and in the far corner of the cabin, where the bunks were located, he saw a little flicker of yellow light through the gray smoke that filled the room.

Leaving the door swinging wide, Barry ran forward. The fire had been started on one of the bunks, and the dry spruce bows that served as spring and mattress were flaming fiercely. In a minute more log walls would have caught, and then it would have been an almost impossible task to save the camp.

With a blanket from the other bunk, Barry beat out the flames, although his brows and lashes singed, and his hands and arms burned in a dozen places. At last, sure that the fire was safely out, he sought the open air, coughing and strangling with the smoke he had been breathing.

"What the devil—" Shorty had just arrived, and the smoke still issuing from the

door of the cabin had caused him to hurry up just as Barry emerged from the door. "Trying to burn down the place or something?"

"Not me!" gasped Barry. "This is friend Sadi's work. Imagine, Shorty! The thermometer twenty odd below, and practically all our provisions in the camp there—and that dirty half-breed trying to burn it down!"

"And that isn't all. The layover camp down on Jackfish is burned down, and every trap on the back route has either been sprung or robbed. And we thought he was bluffing!" he ended bitterly.

"And that isn't all!" put in Shorty grimly. "Half of my line was wrecked just like yours, and a cache of furs I picked up going down there was stolen when I came back."

Barry nodded.

"I didn't think I'd be alone in my troubles. He evidently is going to stop at nothing—but if he's looking for trouble, he's sure to come to the right place to find it.

"We'll tie the dogs close to the camp, and keep watch tonight. He might try to shoot or poison the dogs, or even set fire to the camp. And in the meantime—you'll need a new bottom in your bunk, Shorty. I'll go cut some boughs,"

"It would have to be my bunk, of course," grumbled Shorty.

IV

"IT'S easy enough to say we'll fight back, but how?" asked Shorty as they were eating breakfast the next morning.

"My plan is to do just what Sadi did," explained Barry. "He warned us, and then started. We'll warn him that we mean business too, and then we'll strike back, and strike hard if he doesn't see fit to declare the war off."

"You going up there to the post and put yourself right in his hands?" asked Shorty incredulously.

"Sure!" laughed Barry. "He wouldn't dare to do anything with you here, knowing where I was. This Sadi is a wise chap; he doesn't appear in these things personally, at all. He knows enough to have a healthy fear of the law. Now, if he gets

me, it won't be in any direct fashion like that. I'm going to the post and warn him to call off his men, and if he doesn't—well, warfare is a game best played by two, eh?"

As soon as the dishes were put away, Barry harnessed the dogs and started for the free-trader's post of Sadi Desjoie.

As he approached the post, he was rather surprised at the ground it covered. There was the big store, a house nearly as large, and a group of four or five small camps, about the size of his own lay-over camps, ranged around the clearing. Rather impudently, under the circumstances, the scarlet flag of England whipped from a tall pole near the shore.

Barry stopped his team in front of the store, and looked around. The clearing seemed deserted, but there was smoke coming from the chimneys in every one of the buildings, and Barry was sure he saw faces peering out at him from several of the small square windows. He strode on into the store.

It was the usual trading store: a big, bare room, with a huge stove in the middle, a long counter across the back, and behind that, shelves of nondescript merchandise.

There were two people in the room; the girl, who was sitting beside the stove, and a small, weasel-faced French-Indian leaning casually across the battered counter.

"Jou!" nodded the half breed with a sly smile.

"Good morning," said Barry shortly. "I am looking for one Sadi Desjoie."

"I am Sadi Desjoie," said the weasel-faced man, smiling again. "Ees eet something I can do for M'sieu?"

"Yes. Tell your men to stay away from our territory. They have burned one of our lay-over camps, tried to burn the main camp, with all our provisions, and have robbed our traps. If they try just one thing more—there'll be trouble. Bloody trouble, Desjoie!"

"Sacre bleu!" Sadi's face was a mask of injured, hurt innocence. "You say deese t'ings to Sadi Desjoie? For why, M'sieur? For why should Sadi, the trader, do these t'ings to you?"

"You know very well why," snapped Barry. "You sent Little John to warn us before you started trouble. I've come here to give you like warning. The next time

one of your men starts something on our territory, we'll shoot, and shoot to kill. Self-preservation is the first law of this country, Desjoie!"

"You unspeakable brute!"

Startled, Barry turned to face the girl. She had risen to her feet and stood with her flashing eyes fixed on Barry. "How dare you come here and talk to my father like that? How dare you? Have you no sense of decency whatever? Oh—"

She broke off with a shrug of impotent rage, and turned her back on the speechless Barry.

"You see, M'sieur," said Sadi with his ever-ready, ingratiating smile. "Jaquelin, my daughter, she cannot understand why M'sieur talk so to her father. Eet ees—eet mus' be, M'sieur, that you misunderstand. Eef you have trouble, Sadi ees not responsible. Sadi your good friend; friend to all the trappers, and why not? Eet ees from the trapper that Sadi make his living, *hein?*"

"And the best living from the *Indian* trappers!" remarked Barry significantly. "I am not going to argue with you, Desjoie. You can do as you please. I have given you warning as you gave us warning. If you want trouble, you know where to come to get it!"

Barry snapped out the last words with the crackling, ugly emphasis of a lashing dog-whip and turned to leave.

Just as he reached the door the girl looked up and for a moment met his gaze. Then without a word, she resumed her study of the landscape through the window.

Barry's teeth came together until little knots of muscle writhed along his jaw, but he gave no other sign to show how deeply her scornful glance had wounded him.

He knelt on the back of the toboggan and shouted at the dogs, and as they romped out onto the clear blue of the lake, Barry looked up at the sky.

It was gray, leaden, desolate, cold. He pulled his *koulatang* tighter around his face, and shouted to the dogs, but there was no life in his voice.

V

FOR several days following the delivery of the partners' ultimatum, there was peace. They did not dare to leave their

supplies in the headquarters camp unguarded, so they ran the lines alternately, while one stayed at the main camp to guard it and its precious contents.

It was, however, the breathless lull that precedes the sudden northern storm.

Barry ran into it first.

Around noon, just as he bent over to lift a mink from a steel trap, a rifle barked again from the bush, and Barry's hands were stricken with a sudden numbness. The bullet had struck the steel trap, dashing it from his hands, and numbing them with the shock.

On the instant, Barry put the bole of a tree between himself and the shooter, judging the latter's position by the sound of the rifle. He waited for a moment, but there was no sound.

Quietly he crept from the shelter of the tree, and cautiously made his way toward the spot where the shooter was, or had been.

Barry's fighting blood was thoroughly aroused, and he was determined to have it out with this skulker who fired from ambush. One of them would be dead before Barry left the trail—and the skulker had all the advantage.

With dogged courage Barry proceeded. Every moment he expected to hear the spiteful crack of a high-powered rifle, and the burning agony of the bullet in his vitals, but he kept on.

A hundred, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away, he came to the spot where the man had stood, behind a clump of small tamaracks. There was the empty shell on the snow, and the snow shoe tracks leading up to the spot—and away from it. But the man was not there.

Barry picked up the shell. It was a .303; powerful enough to down a moose at five hundred yards. He pocketed the shell with a grim smile, and started out on the trail that led away from the clump of tamaracks.

The man was making good time, Barry could tell that from the long strides he was taking. Also, it was an Indian he was following, as he had suspected, for the toes of the webs turned sharply inward. The pigeon-toed tendency of the Indian is greatly exaggerated in his snowshoe stride.

Doggedly Barry followed the trail. He knew that it was very likely the Indian doubled back on his tracks, and was

waiting for Barry to pass close by. He kept a sharp lookout, but never did he discover any suspicious coloring or movement in the bush, and he kept on, using the peculiar dog-trot that eats up so many snowy miles.

The man had followed the top of a long ridge that dropped, at its end into a lake. As Barry came out in view of the lake, the skulker's rifle roared again, and Barry heard the crack of the bullet as it passed close to his head.

On the instant, Barry dropped to a crouching position on the snow, his rifle at his shoulder, and his gray eyes, like a hawk's, searching the bush ahead.

It took him but a split second to find what he was looking for: the faint haze of powder smoke from the Indian's rifle. It came from a little clump of tag-alders along the shore, and even as he looked, Barry detected a slight movement in the alder branches, and caught the flash of sunlight on the blued steel.

Barry's rifle roared. Like a flash the bolt flew back, the shell went flying, and the rifle spoke again.

There was a sudden commotion in the tag-alders, and then from them, out onto the lake, there staggered a man. Three steps on the ice and he crumpled up, his rifle sliding from him on the smooth surface. Even from where he stood, Barry could see a black stain spreading on the ice, from under the motionless body.

Barry reloaded his rifle, his face gray and strained.

"First blood for us," he muttered as he turned back on his trail. "I hate it, but it had to be. He asked for it."

Shorty, when he heard of the two attempts on Barry's life, and the shooting of the Indian, shook his head.

"Now we *are* in for it," he said dolefully.

"Not any more than we were. They tried twice to pot me from ambush. What more can they do than that—except perhaps get one of us the next time? We warned them, and they replied with bullets. I saw them, and went them one better, that's all."

They kept watch that night, but nothing happened until just as the two were washing up for breakfast.

Something struck the door with a sharp thud, as though a rock had been thrown

against it. There was no other movement or sound.

Barry opened the door cautiously, and gave a little exclamation of surprise. Sticking in the door was an arrow, and in the cleft end was a note scribbled on birch bark.

Forgetting caution in his amazement, Barry stood in the open doorway and drew forth the note, while Shorty looked over his shoulder.

"Blood is on your hands," read Barry, "Still we will let you go in peace, if you will. But if you do not go, we shall wipe you out at once—and we shall not miss. If you will go, hold up your hands above your head, in token. We shall be watching. If you do not—"

The threat was left unfinished, and the note was unsigned.

"What shall we do, Shorty?" asked Barry quietly.

"Give me that note," said Shorty dolefully. From his pocket he drew a match, and with a swift motion he struck the match and applied it to the bark. The note burst into a flare of smoky flame, and Shorty tossed it contemptuously toward the bush, where lay the invisible watcher. "That's the only answer I can think of," said Shorty.

As he spoke a rifle cracked from near the edge of the clearing, and both Shorty and Barry leaped inside the cabin. As they slammed the heavy door shut, the invisible rifle spoke again, and a bullet crashed through the heavy door sending splinters flying through the room.

"Nice, pleasant people," said Shorty. "Look!" He lifted his left arm. There was blood streaming from it, and from his left side.

"My God! They got you!" exclaimed Barry. "I—"

"Got nothing!" disclaimed Shorty. "Bullet went right plumb between my arm and my side, barely nicking me. They did miss again, no matter what the letter said!"

Shorty's diagnosis proved correct. The bullet had made a big bruise on both the inside of his arm and the side of his chest, but the skin was barely broken.

"There's one thing that puzzles me," murmured Barry half to himself, as he swabbed the two wounds with iodine.

"What's that?"

"There is only one person at Eau Blanc

post who could have written that note," said Barry slowly, "and that is—"

"Who?" asked Shorty, a sudden light of understanding shining in his eyes.

"Sadi's daughter, *Jacquelin!*"

VI

THEY were prisoners; as much prisoners as though they had been behind prison bars. Only they were confined by hot lead instead of cold steel.

Once Shorty walked too close to one of the windows, and a bullet blew one of the small panes to bits, missing its mark by a scant inch and burying itself in the opposite log wall. Every now and again a bullet crashed through the door with a flash of flying slivers, as if to let them know that to venture forth would mean death.

They tried, of course, to locate the hidden marksmen, but without any luck.

"I'm going wide-open crazy, if this keeps up!" declared Shorty late in the afternoon, the direct reason for the remark being another bullet through the already riddled door. "This is gettin' on my nerves, and I don't mind sayin' so!"

Barry was laying in his bunk, pulling meditatively on his pipe.

"I don't blame you, Shorty. Two sided shooting is a great game, but being potted like rats in a trap is no sport for the rats—meaning us. It's up to us to do something."

"Such as what?"

"Well, we can't fight them back from here, that's sure. The only thing to do is to take the war to them."

"How,"

"I've just been thinking that over. Say I slip out of here tonight—it's cloudy, and will be dark—and go over to the post. Maybe I could do enough damage there to make them feel like quitting over here. Eh?"

"You'd probably get killed."

"If we stay here and do nothing, the chances are we'll both get killed," replied Barry rather grimly. "You stay here and guard the outfit, and I'll take the chance."

"Why not let me go?" asked Shorty aggressively. "I'd like doggone well to take a pot shot at some of those babies."

"You've got a blighty," chuckled Barry, brightening up as the prospect for action

took more definite form in his mind. "Besides, this is my idea. I want to stretch my legs a little!"

Shorty grumbled about the arrangements, just as he would have grumbled if he had been elected to go. That was his nature. But when at last it was the time elected for Barry's departure, Shorty wrung his partner's hand, and bade him good luck in a voice that shook a little.

"So long, Shorty," replied Barry in a whisper. "I'll be back before daylight. Hold the fort!" And with an answering grip of the hand, Barry softly opened the door and disappeared into the night.

Shorty stood close to the door listening, his face tense and white, for he knew that it was a desperate chance Barry was taking. The night was pitchy dark, but with snow on the ground, any moving body is likely to be visible at close range. If the silent watchers had crept up close under cover of darkness, Barry's doom was almost surely sealed. If they had remained at a distance, he had a fair chance of getting away.

A minute throbbed by—two minutes, and still there was not a sound from outside. Three minutes—four. Shorty drew a long, quivering sigh of relief. With any luck at all, Barry was out of the danger zone by now.

BARRY himself was buoyed up by the excitement of the thing. He closed the door behind him as silently as a shadow, and stood crouched against the cabin, motionless, for a long minute, listening and peering into the surrounding darkness.

The snow at his feet was a dusky, wavering gray in the utter darkness, and the edge of the bush a formless shadow, surprisingly close.

Slowly he pulled his webs from the snow and slung them across his back. Still there was no sound, no movement in the bush.

Cautiously Barry moved away from the camp.

There was a well-packed trail down to the lake. Stooping low so as to make himself as inconspicuous as possible, Barry crept quickly and silently toward the lake.

Once a twig cracked sharply in the bush not ten feet away, and Barry paused for perhaps two minutes without moving a muscle, rifle ready and his eyes striving to pierce the gloom. There was no further

sound, so Barry decided it was only a frost-brittle branch cracking under its load of snow, and he moved silently on.

Once at the edge of the lake, he drew a soft sigh of relief, and slipped into his webs. Then, carrying his rifle easily in one hand, he set out in the direction of the post.

He had only his sense of direction to guide him, and it took him over two hours to make the trip, but at last he saw a faint yellow square of light ahead of him, and he knew he was near his objective.

Cautiously he drew near.

The light, he found, emanated from the store. All the other buildings in the clearing were dark and silent.

This was not quite what Barry had expected, but it fitted in with his plans beautifully. Barry had not explained fully to Shorty, knowing his partner would object to the risks entailed, but Barry had conceived the idea of making Sadi a hostage; the price of his liberty being the permanent ending of hostilities.

"Now if that's only Sadi in the store, I'm in luck right," mused Barry as he crept silently up the trail leading to the store. "I'll have him hiking back to the camp with me in about two shakes of the proverbial lamb's tail!"

Barry peered in at the lighted window, trusting to luck that he would not be observed, and chuckled silently as he saw that the lone occupant of the big room was Sadi himself, seated dejectedly in front of the stove, his head nodding on his chest.

"You've got the surprise of your life coming, old timer!" thought Barry, moving silently around to the door. "Here goes!"

Quickly he flung open the door and swung it shut behind him.

Sadi started from his chair, his hand reaching for the heavy .45 he wore from a sagging holster, but Barry stopped him with a significant jerk of his rifle.

"Don't!" he advised softly. "I'd shoot you as quick as I'd shoot a wolf, Desjoie." And in Barry's eyes, and in his voice, Sadi read the truth of the remark. Barry was playing for high stakes: his partner's life and his own. It was not the time or place for soft sentiment.

"But, M'sieur—" began Sadi excitedly. "Quiet!" commanded Barry. He whipped

his handkerchief from his pocket, and securely gagged the half breed. Sadi's gun he appropriated for his own use. A heavy mackinaw hung from the wall, he tossed to his prisoner with a brief command.

"Get into that, my friend, and we'll go," said Barry. "I see a pair of webs sticking in the snow outside the door; they'll do for you nicely. Hustle, now; some of your friends may be dropping in!"

Sadi made strange guttural, gagging sounds in his throat and his black eyes rolled in their sockets as he tried to speak, but Barry herded him out of the door with a good-natured chuckle.

"Yes, I know all about it, old timer," he said. "You don't understand why I should be so high-handed, and this is an outrage, and you're as innocent as an unborn babe, and all that sort of thing. You can tell me all about it over to our camp. But just now, you get into those webs and *mush!*"

Mutely protesting, but obeying the jabbing muzzle of the gun, Sadi obeyed. A less discerning man than Sadi Desjoie would have known that Barry meant business that night.

THE trip back across the lake was without incident, except that Sadi would not make as good time as Barry thought he should, and constant prodding was necessary to make the older man keep up the stiff pace Barry set.

It took some time for Barry to locate the trail that led up to his camp, but after scouting around for half an hour or so, he located it, with a little sigh of relief. It would not be long before the rising sun would make his position decidedly precarious.

"Listen," he whispered intensely to his prisoner. "We're going back into camp. Your men will shoot if they hear or see a thing. And if I can manage it, they'll have to shoot through *you* to get *me*. So watch your step, old timer!"

Barry made Sadi lead the way, guiding him with a soft pressure on his shoulder. The half breed slipped along as quietly as a snowflake falls, and in three or four minutes, they stood crouched in front of the cabin door, safe.

Three soft taps on the door, and a fourth after a moment's pause, the signal they had agreed upon, and the door clicked open,

Barry shoved his prisoner inside, and shut the door with a triumphant bang.

"I got him, Shorty!" he whispered delightedly. "I got him!"

"Got who—what?" asked Shorty in amazement at seeing two shadowy figures instead of the one he had been watching for.

"Sadi! The king-pin of the works. Now he'll call off the animals or we'll talk turkey to him. Some idea, what?"

"Well I'll be damned!" said Shorty admiringly, lighting a couple of candles.

Barry removed the gag from Sadi's mouth, chuckling.

"Talk all you want to now, old timer," he invited. "The sooner you let your friends outside know you're here, the sooner we'll all be happy!"

Sadi working his aching jaw speechlessly for a moment, his eyes flashing.

"You fool!" he managed to ejaculate at last. "You beeg fool you! Leettle John, he go against me. He say he run you out himself, he and his men get all your furs and supply. And besides, Leettle John, he a fool; he try make love to my Jacquelin—that real reason we fight.

"You t'ink you do beeg theeng, you capture Sadi; all you do is get one more mouth to feed, and leave Jacquelin alone for Leettle John! *Sacre nom du nom*, M'sieu, you one beeg fool, you!"

"I knew there'd be a catch in it somewhere," groaned Shorty.

Barry was silent. He was thinking of a girl with lustrous dark eyes and an elfin face, alone, at the mercy of Little John and his men.

VII

SADI'S revelations changed everything. Instead of holding the big trump card they had figured Sadi would be, the partners had merely picked up a worthless discard. And they had left a young girl at the mercy of a band of men who, as they well knew, would stop at nothing under the heavens.

From Sadi they learned that Little John himself, with two of his men, was personally directing the siege of the cabin, and Barry chuckled delightedly as he thought how angry the Indian would be to learn of Barry's trip to the post, and his return with

the prisoner, right under three pairs of watching eyes.

"I guess they took it more or less for granted that we had gone to bed when the lights went out, and went to sleep on the job," he remarked to Shorty. "Otherwise they would have plugged me sure. Indians can see in the dark like cats!"

"All that risk for nothing!" replied Shorty. "What are we going to do now?"

"There's only one thing to do, and that is, to go back again tonight and get the girl. With her father there, she would have been safe, I imagine. I'm going back to the Post again tonight, and bring the girl back with me!"

"M'sieur," said Sadi gravely, "you are a fool—but a so brave fool. I t'ink I like you better as a friend than as an enemy, *oui*!"

"M'sieur," said Barry as gravely, "you found that out too late. You're the cause of all this trouble, and—I'm rather careful about my friends!" Sadi smiled greasily, and lapsed into silence.

Shorty, of course, strenuously objected to Barry's plan, but as usual, Barry had his way.

"They don't know yet that I was away last night," he urged. "Sadi disappeared; that's all they'll know. You can't track on packed trails or glare ice. And—well, we're white men, aren't we?"

The exit was accomplished exactly as it had been the night before, and in many ways, with less danger, for there was a stiff, noisy wind blowing that would hide any slight sound Barry might make.

The wind was against him going, but he reflected optimistically that it would be behind him on the way back, and in that way even things up. He remembered, however, the slight margin of time he had had the night before, and he hurried as best he could, bucking the stinging, arctic wind with bowed head, and thanking his lucky stars for the snug, wind-proof *koulatang* he wore. A thirty or forty-mile wind on an open lake, with the thermometer hovering between twenty and thirty below, is a wind that chills to the bone if one is not adequately protected.

THE post presented a very different sight, tonight, for every camp in the clearing was lit up, the store was ablaze

with lights, and even from a distance Barry could hear the excited shouting and the weird, maudlin singing of drunken Indians. "They've located Sadi's booze cache," thought Barry grimly.

"With them drunk, my job will be easier in some ways, and harder in others. But the girl's in greater danger, certainly. Sober; I doubt if Little John or any of his crew could touch a girl with as much white blood in her veins as Jacquelin—no matter if her father is Sadi Desjoie! But drunk, an Indian will do anything." Barry pressed on faster than ever.

For a minute or two Barry crouched in the bush at the edge of the clearing, getting his bearings. All the noise seemed to be coming from the store, and Barry decided it was likely the larger part of the Indians were in the big room of the store holding a drunken pow-wow. Perhaps, he thought with a sudden flare of anger, the girl was there too!

The thought stung him to action, and quietly he stole up to the end of the store, staying away from the windows and the door, for he would almost surely be observed if he looked in a window, and the door might fly open any time.

He could hear very well from his position, crouched against the lee side of the cabin, for the men inside were shouting with drunken abandon. Two or three men were trying to sing a French *voyageur's* song, and were having very good success. One young buck with a voice decidedly uncertain, was relating an endless tale of his prowess as a trapper. Close to the wall two drunken Indians were conversing solemnly in Cree, discussing the most absurd topics with drunken gravity.

At last, from the hodge-podge of sound, Barry weeded out the voice of Little John.

He was speaking in Cree, telling what a very brave man he was, to go against Sadi. He enlarged at length upon Sadi's fear of him, and hinted that he held a club over Sadi's head. He cursed Sadi as a coward because he had run away the night before. He praised Sadi's good liquor, and called it by its Cree name which may be freely translated as "Water-of-joyous-burning."

"And now," he ended triumphantly, "Little John will take the girl Jacquelin. She will be his squaw. She is beautiful, she is strong, she is a good worker! Lucky is

Little John, to have such a squaw as Jacquelin!"

He continued, Indian fashion, with a long list of the girl's charms, and her desirable qualities as a squaw, but Barry waited no longer. He knew from the way the Indian talked, that she was not in the store. Undoubtedly, then, she was at Sadi's house, and to the house Barry made his way.

Barry knew, of course, that the girl would be guarded, and he took no chances. Carefully he crept up to the house, and peered in at the corner of one of the lighted windows. He was looking into the kitchen, and there was no one in sight. He moved along the wall, and again peered in. This time he had better luck; the girl was sitting, bound to her chair, in the center of the room, and in the doorway between that room and the kitchen sat a big buck Indian, leering at the girl, and just as Barry peered in, draining the last drink from a quart bottle.

Carefully Barry looked around, but he could see no further guards. Undoubtedly, with the girl tied, and with no thought of an attempt at rescue, Little John deemed one guard plenty.

Barry crept around the house to the rear door. He knew he had no chance to sneak up behind the Indian guard, for the instant he opened the door, the icy draft from outside would warn even the drunken guard that danger threatened.

There was no time to lose. At any moment the drunken Little John might come staggering out of the store to claim his squaw.

His gun ready, Barry flung open the door, and closed it instantly behind him. The guard turned and leaped to his feet, but before he could even touch his weapon, Barry had him covered.

"A move or a sound and you're through!" he said quietly. "Back up to the wall there, and keep your hands high. There!"

Silently the Indian obeyed, his eyes popping from his head and his jaw sagging in alcoholic bewilderment.

Keeping the Indian covered, Barry cut the girl's bonds.

"Hurry! We're liable to be discovered any moment. Get into something warm and do it quick!"

The girl glanced at him coldly, without a word, but did as he ordered.

"Now keep him covered a moment," he said to the girl, "and I'll fix him so he won't give the alarm."

Hastily he bound and gagged the Indian, and laid him on the floor.

A moment later they hurried out into the night, across a dark part of the clearing, into the bush, around to the shore, and out onto the lake.

Not a word did they speak; it was no time for conversation.

Barry had picked up the girl's webs as they passed out of the house, but the ice was blown smooth over the larger part of the lake, and it would be some time before they would need the racquets. Hastily they struck out across the smooth ice, the wind directly behind them; the post, with its bright lights and its sounds of revelry at their backs.

Perhaps three minutes after the two set forth, there was a sudden commotion behind them, and they knew the girl's flight had been discovered. They could hear excited voices calling drunkenly, the wind bringing the words to them loudly, but strangely distorted. Figures dashed back and forth across lighted windows, and doors opened and shut; a yellow rectangle one moment that disappeared the next with miraculous suddenness.

"Thank God they're drunk!" muttered Barry to himself. "Their muddled heads will never put two and two together. They'll think it was Sadi that freed her, if they think at all. That guard was too drunk to be able to tell them anything." The girl said nothing, but hurried on beside her rescuer in silence.

Without much difficulty this time, Barry found the trail that led up to the camp, and he whispered a brief warning to the girl, enjoining silence as the price of their lives. She nodded silently, and Barry, crouching low, led the way up the trail.

THEY were just about to leave the trail and enter the clearing when Barry, with that odd sense that bushmen often develop, felt a presence near him. He reached back and gripped the girl's arm suddenly. As he did so, a rifle roared deafeningly only a few yards away, and Barry heard the action click as the empty car-

tridge was thrown out and a new one fed into the chamber.

Barry turned like a flash and picked up the girl in his arms.

"Shorty!" he shouted as he ran toward the camp with his burden. "Open up! Hurry!"

There was a great crashing in the bush behind him, and the rifle roared again, scoring a clean miss in the darkness.

He saw the door of the camp swing open, and he half plunged, half stumbled through it to the warmth and safety of the camp. A third bullet thudded into the wall of the camp just as Shorty slammed the door shut.

"Never touched us!" exulted Barry. "We fooled them again!"

Amidst a rapid fire of congratulations and questions, Barry lighted some candles and declared himself ready for a hot cup of coffee.

The girl and Sadi sat apart, close together, conversing rapidly in French.

"Have some coffee, miss?" asked Barry, when the steaming refreshment was ready, and holding out a tin cup invitingly.

The girl glanced up at him coldly.

"Thank you, no," she said icily. "As your prisoner, I would prefer to accept no favors at your hands."

Barry, remembering that once before she had refused his proffered hospitality, flushed and turned away without a word.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Shorty, addressing the girl in amazement, and with his usual bluntness. "Here Barry risks his life to save you from Little John, and you talk—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted the girl frigidly. "My father has told me the whole story."

Shorty turned to Barry, and shrugged his shoulders. He said something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "Oh, hell!"

Barry drank his coffee in silence.

VIII

TWO weary days dragged by in the camp. Jacquelin and Sadi talked in low voices in their own corner of the room, and aside from an occasional brief answer to a direct remark, held no communication with the partners.

Shorty, as was his nature, groused

glumly, proposing at intervals to go out and lick the whole crew single handed, one at a time or all at once. Every time the watchers of the cabin sent a bullet plunking into the walls, or splintering through the door Shorty swore under his breath and looked longingly at his rifle.

Pacing restlessly up and down the cabin, Barry turned the situation over and over in his mind. To stay in the cabin, with four mouths to feed, and without fresh meat to eke out the rations, would mean starvation before many weeks—and besides, with Sadi and the girl acting as they were, the situation was intolerable.

What, then, could be done? That was the question Barry asked himself, and pondered until his head fairly ached. It was late in the afternoon of the second day before the solution came to him.

That night Barry ate a hearty meal, and stuffed the pockets of his parka with bannock sandwiches. Sadi and the girl looked on curiously, but asked no questions. Carefully Barry cleaned and oiled his rifle, and adjusted the micrometer sight to his satisfaction. From his bag of personal odds and ends he drew out a soft, heavy, leather sling, and threaded it through the swivels of the rifle. Then he stood the gun in the corner near the door, lit his pipe, and smoked calmly and patiently until after midnight.

Up until the last moment Shorty tried to persuade Barry from attempting to carry out his plan.

"They'll bump you off sure!" he protested. "They saw you comin' in the other night, and they'll be watchin' for just some such move. There's no sense in committin' suicide, just to be doing something."

"The suicide business is going to be on the other side, Shorty," said Barry grimly. "It's darker than a pocket outside, and even if they do take a pot shot at me, they won't be able to hit anything in the dark. If the worse comes to the worst, I can always dash back to the camp.

"Shucks! If you want to be worrying about anybody—worry about them!"

Barry slipped into the warmest garments he had, with his heavy fur *koulatang* over all. On his hands he had two pairs of mittens; one of fine wool, with the forefinger free, and the outer pair of muskrat, fur side out, and lined with heavy wool. He

slung his rifle over his shoulder, felt his pockets to make sure that the several extra clips of cartridges were safely stowed away, and then, with a cheery, whispered word to Shorty, he softly opened the door and disappeared into the darkness.

Once outside he wasted no time in making his way out of the clearing and seeking the shelter of the bush.

IT was hair-raising work, for every moment he knew the icy stillness of the night might be shattered by a rifle report, he would be hunted down like a marauding wolf. At any moment he might run almost into the arms of a waiting, silent watcher, to be shot without warning, without a chance, or else made a miserable prisoner.

The seconds dragged into minutes, and Barry continued his silent, shadow-like progress without any alarm being raised. He swung through the bush in a great circle, away from the lake, toward the steep ridge that ran back of the camp, overlooking the clearing and the lake.

The crust was firm, and even without his webs, was sufficient to support his weight, but he had to move with the utmost caution to avoid snapping a twig, breaking through a soft spot in the crust, or otherwise betraying his presence. It was slow, exhausting work, for every nerve was tense, every muscle taut, but at last, after perhaps two hours' maneuvering, he reached his objective: a great hemlock that towered somewhat above its fellows at the very top of the ridge almost directly back of the camp.

For perhaps ten minutes Barry relaxed at the foot of the tree, resting. Above, the branches screeched and cracked now and then, in frozen agony, and the gentle breeze that was springing up sighed remotely in the needles far overhead.

At last Barry straightened up, adjusted his rifle on his back, and started climbing the tree. He could not prevent the rasping sound of his clothing rubbing against the rough bark, as he gripped the rugged bole with legs and arms, and he had visions of being potted by some alarmed watcher, as a squirrel is knocked from the trunk of an oak tree, but he kept doggedly on.

He reached the first of the great outspreading branches, and being careful not to dislodge its accumulated snow, rested

for a space. The climb had been a long one, and hampered with his heavy clothing and the weight of his gun and ammunition, it had been a hard one as well.

He resumed the climb in a few minutes, however, carefully working around the trunk from one great out-thrusting branch to another, until at last he was close to the top, and could see the dense blue-black sky overhead, but little lighter than the utter, icy darkness that surrounded him.

At the point Barry selected, two large branches emerged from the trunk side by side, and within a few inches of each other, forming a sort of precarious platform. And upon this insecure perch, close to the trunk of the tree, Barry seated himself, huddled over the rifle across his knees, and waited for the coming of the dawn.

It was bitterly cold, and the breeze made it worse. The tree swayed surprisingly, and its branches groaned and crackled in protest. The minutes dragged by in a weary procession. From time to time Barry shifted his position a bit, to give his cramped muscles a rest, but in the main he was motionless, silent, watchful, waiting as relentlessly as fate itself for the coming of the light.

At last the dawn broke; gray and cold and clear. The darkness dissolved slowly. Gradually Barry could make out the line of the horizon, the concealing branches of the tree in which he was perched, the sheen of the lake, the camp itself, and suddenly it was light.

Cautiously Barry moved a little, to a position from which he commanded a wide sweep of country to the west of the clearing. For a moment his cold gray eyes searched the bush, and then they lit up with a cold fire.

He crouched against the trunk of the tree alertly. His eyes did not leave a small red speck that was moving in the bush as he mechanically adjusted the sling, twisted it around his arm in the old familiar position, and brought the comb of the rifle to his cheek.

For a moment he peered through the tiny aperture of the peep sight, the little spot of red just barely visible over the gold bead of the front sight. Then slowly, steadily, he pressed the trigger.

The rifle roared like a crack of doom.

The red spot jerked suddenly, moved for a moment, and then sank motionless in the snow.

Barry drew back the bolt of his rifle slowly, and caught the empty shell as the ejector tipped it upward.

"A red mackinaw is a bad thing to wear in your business, my friend," he muttered as he pocketed the empty shell and closed the bolt on a new one.

Barely had he turned down the bolt when the figure of another man appeared, running excitedly, not a hundred yards from the dead man sprawled in the snow.

It was a more difficult shot, but Barry had had much practice and with the crack of his rifle its second victim for the day staggered, ran haltingly a few steps, and then fell straight forward into the snow.

"Devilish business," muttered Barry, "but—it's your lives or ours, and I prefer that it be yours!" He moved around to the other side of the tree, making sure he was sheltered always by the concealing boughs of the tree. From his new location he could command a view to the north and east, and once more he saw a figure moving in the bush.

Barry's rifle roared for the third time, and again a moving figure sank motionless in the snow. And then for a long time, Barry saw no living thing in the bush.

FOR several hours he scanned the bush without avail. He drew his frozen sandwiches from his pocket and munched them slowly as he watched, wishing the while for a steaming cup of coffee.

Around three or four in the afternoon, Barry caught sight of a cautious figure skirting the shore of the lake, preparatory to starting toward the post. It was four hundred, perhaps five hundred yards away, and Barry elevated his rear sight carefully. To miss now would spoil his plans utterly, by alarming the rest of Little John's crew too soon.

Carefully Barry lined up the sights on the slinking, cautious figure. He pressed the trigger and the gun roared through the stillness, but instead of stopping the distant Indian, the bullet sent up a glistening shower of ice at his feet, and he started out on a desperate run.

With a muttered oath Barry snapped the bolt back and closed it with what seemed

to be one continuous blur of movement.

The man was further away now, and running like a deer, but he was in plain view, and outlined sharply against the ice.

As Barry's rifle spoke again, the man stumbled, slid for a moment on the ice, half scrambled to his feet, and then collapsed in a little motionless heap.

"I don't think they'll stir again until after dark," muttered Barry, and he proved to be a good guesser. Although he watched vigilantly all the rest of the afternoon, until it grew so dark he could not see a hundred feet away, nothing moved in the bush, or out across the lake.

Barry felt reasonably certain that there were several watchers left, and that as soon as night fell, they would rush to Little John and his companions with the story of the disaster that had overtaken them.

"By dawn every man jack of them will be back here, with blood in his eyes," mused Barry. The thought somehow, seemed to please him.

Shortly after dark he slid down from the tree and boldly made his way directly to the cabin. He had an idea there would be no watchers on the job.

He was right.

IX

BETWEEN gulps of hot coffee Barry answered the questions Shorty fired at him, receiving Shorty's admiring comments with a little shake of his head.

"It was sickening work," he said shortly.

"No more sickening than being shot at and finally starved to death!" said Shorty. "It was either them or us and—"

"I know. Up here each man has to protect his own skin. But it was sickening work, just the same. And now how about you—all packed?"

Shorty indicated the bundles piled up in the center of the floor.

"Ready when you are: been working at it all afternoon. Blankets, grub, all the furs. What's left in the cabin won't be much of a loss."

Barry set his cup down and put on his parka again.

"Let's go!"

Sadi and Jacquelin watched them inquiringly, but, neither asked any questions. There was a troubled look in the girl's

eyes, as if she did not know just what to believe as she glanced from Barry to Sadi and back again.

Together the partners slipped out into the night. There was an odd chance that they might be watched, and potted, but their situation was still desperate, and they took the chance. The dogs had not been shot by the skulking Indians, probably because dogs are at a premium in the north country and the Indians figured the dogs worth more alive than dead.

Quickly the partners harnessed all the dogs to the larger of the two tobaggans, dreading every moment to hear the crack of a rifle, or some indication that they were still watched. They finished the job without being molested, however, and returned to the cabin.

"You two get dressed for what may be a long trip," said Barry shortly, nodding toward Sadi and the girl.

"We go away from here?" asked Sadi eagerly.

"We do—right away!"

While Sadi and the girl were putting on their things, Barry and Shorty loaded the toboggan, made the load fast with the lashing rope and gave a last look around the cabin.

"Where we go, M'sieur?" asked Sadi with his ingratiating smile.

"I don't know yet," said Barry. "The young lady can ride, the rest of us will mush along behind. Leave the candles burning—those two in the holders—so they'll think we're still here when they come back." He closed the door carefully behind him, and Barry motioned toward the toboggan.

"Will you ride, miss?"

"Thank you, no," said the girl. "I have tried to make it clear before that I did not care to accept any favors at your hands!"

Barry shrugged and turned away. Shorty spoke in a low tone to the dogs, and they almost jerked him off his feet as they tightened the tail-rope. Jacquelin and Sadi followed Shorty in single file, and Barry, his rifle ready, brought up the rear to guard against an attack.

BARRY'S plan, in brief, was to take possession of the post, and thus cut off the enemy from their source of supply.

The little party did not head directly for the post, however, for they wanted to give Little John and his men plenty of time to get away. They bore toward a point perhaps a mile above the post, and waited on the far shore of the lake for perhaps two hours before venturing cautiously down the shore toward the post.

As Barry had expected, the place was dark, and since it was not yet midnight, that could only mean that the post was deserted.

Barry left the party some distance away and made a brief survey, just to be sure they were not walking into a trap, but found every evidence of a hasty and complete exodus.

He called to Shorty, and five minutes later they were all four in the big room of the store, the stove roaring jovially, the kerosene lights blazing, and the doors barred.

"You and your daughter might just as well get a little sleep," suggested Barry to Sadi. "Shorty and I are going to watch for the return of our little friends, so they don't try any tricks on us, but there's no reason you shouldn't sleep. Here are plenty of blankets, and back in the store room everything will be quiet."

"Eet ees mighty good of you, M'sieur," nodded Sadi gratefully, with his smirking, unpleasant smile. "We leave our saftee in your so brave hands!" And bowing to each of the partners in turn, he left the room. The girl, after a moment's hesitation, followed him.

THE long silent hours dragged by at last, and in the south and east the darkness thinned to gray. Shorty, leaving Barry to watch, put on the coffee pot, and began rustling breakfast. The aroma of the coffee and bacon, and the sounds of Shorty's busy clattering evidently awoke Sadi and the girl, for they appeared a few minutes later, and with a brief word or two the girl took charge of the culinary matters and left Shorty free to watch for Little John's return.

As she busied herself with the work, Jacquelin watched the two partners carefully, and more especially Barry. His profile was toward her, and she studied the clean-cut lines, a little frown puckering her brows. Now and again, when Barry

glanced her way, she lowered her eyes quickly, and ignored him utterly.

"Breakfast is ready," she announced at last.

The hungry men needed no second invitation, and the meal was quickly disposed of.

They had just finished eating when Shorty, who had maintained a post of vantage near a window called out grimly.

"Here they come!" he said. "Better get your rifles ready, you and Sadi; they may try something!"

"I do not theenk so," grinned Sadi, his eyes evil. "Theese place ees strong. See the heavy wooden shutters at the windows, and the strong bar across the door! Theese men know; I theenk they weel want peace, M'sieur!"

It soon became evident that Sadi was right. The band of men gathered in a cluster at the edge of the shore, arguing excitedly. The smoke pouring from the chimney was proof that the post was tenanted, and it was not difficult for them to figure out who the tenants were.

At last one man detached himself from the group and slowly approached the store. His hands, empty, were held above his head, palms forward—the sign of peace the world over.

Barry met the Indian at the door, and waited for him to speak first.

"You catchum post, all food, everyting," said the Indian haltingly. "We sorree we no friends with you. We—"

"You're rather late with your regrets," cut in Barry coldly. "You go back and tell Little John that if he has anything to say, to come and say it himself. Understand?"

The Indian nodded and retraced his steps.

X

LITTLE JOHN smiled a thin-lipped smile as he looked around the store. His eyes rested longest on Sadi, who seemed to shrink beneath the Indian's level gaze. But when he spoke, he addressed himself to Barry.

"We are the losers," he said shortly in Cree. "It is much different from what I told you. We must have food; we must be friends."

"We didn't ask for this trouble, Little John," said Barry curtly. "All we asked

was that you leave us alone. Instead of that, you destroyed our sets, burned our camps, stole our furs, shot at us from ambush, made prisoners of us in our camp. And now you say you would be friends with us!"

A sudden light flared in the Indian's dark eyes.

"Yes we do these things!" he snarled. "That is right. But why?" He paused dramatically, his beady eyes roaming from one tense face to the other. "Why? I will tell you why! Because we were lead by a man with an evil mind; a man to whom wealth is a god; a man who sell bad liquor to us, and as its price, make us do as he say. We do these things because—" and he turned and pointed a lean and quivering finger at Sadi—"because that man make us!"

Sadi's dark face flamed a sullen red, and an evil flame flickered in his eyes.

"You lie!" he said hoarsely.

"I do not lie! You do these things. And more than this! My father told me—"

BEFORE the Indian could complete the sentence Sadi snatched up Barry's rifle, his eyes gleaming with insane fire.

Shorty and Barry leaped forward to snatch the weapon from the half-breed's hands, but before they could reach him, Sadi fired.

Little John leaped sideways just as the gun roared, and the flame from the muzzle seared his cheek, the bullet thudding harmlessly into the wall behind him.

The Indian cried out gutturally and sprang forward. Sadi swung his gun wildly, but, it landed glancingly on the Indian's shoulder just as Little John's long right arm shot out and his bony fist crashed against the stubby point of Sadi's jaw.

Sadi grunted sharply and staggered backward. As he did so, his foot tripped over a large piece of stove wood on the floor and he lost his balance.

With a cry like the squeak of an angry rat he fell. The back of his head struck the sharp corner of the stove with a sickening crunch and he fell limply to the floor, his jaw sagging open. There was a momentary odor of scorched flesh and hair in the room.

For a moment there was utter silence, and then the girl sank to the floor beside

Sadi with a little horrified, sobbing cry.

She lifted the dangling head, and her hands came forth red and sticky. Barry glanced at Shorty and shook his head slowly.

"He's dead," he said softly. "It is unfortunate—but I do not blame you, Little John. You were here under what amounted to a flag of truce. He—well, let us say nothing more about it."

The girl had been listening, her eyes wide with sorrow, her lashes wet with tears.

"But—" she said painfully, "he—was my father! And he's dead!" The tears came in a rush now, and she bent over the still figure, sobbing.

"He is dead, yes," said Little John slowly. "But—he was not your father!"

"What?" Three voices cried out the word in tones of startled amazement.

"He was not your father," repeated the Indian calmly. "He knew I knew that; that one reason why he shoot at me."

Slowly the girl arose to her feet, her eyes fixed on the Indian's impassive face.

"Not my father?" she repeated dully. "Then—"

"It is not a short story," began Little John. "Many years ago, when my father, he is my age, this Sadi come up here. A white man—from the States, I think, and his French wife, they build this post here. Sadi come here. He want to make love to the woman. She hate, fear, Sadi, and tell her husband. The husband, he tell Sadi to go away, never come back, or he will shoot. Sadi, very angry, shoot this white man from the bush one day. Hide his body at bottom of lake. Go back to post, take the woman. Two, three weeks, later, she kill herself.

"There is a little baby, a girl. Sadi, nobody knows why, kept the little girl. Maybe, he think be good to the girl, the ghosts of her mother and father will not come back to haunt him. I do not know.

"He is a very bad man, Sadi. He sell liquor to the Indians. He threaten them. They are ignorant; they think Sadi their friend. Sadi tell the police the white man sell him the post; the Indians, they say so too, and the police believe. The little girl, he hide.

"When the Great Father make the law so that there is no whiskey to be sold Indians, Sadi, make it himself, and sell it—"

"No!" interrupted the girl in an agitated whisper. "The white men—like these—they sell the whiskey. That is why—"

Little John shook his head.

"I tell the truth," he said. Sadi make the liquor. He tell you the white men that come in do it, to explain why he fight these white men. We fight for him, because we like the whiskey Sadi make. We know that if he goes, we can get no more whiskey.

"This time, Sadi go too far; give us too much to drink. We think he will be the boss. We turn against Sadi. I—"

"Little John," he said solemnly, "has been a fool. He has been a very bad man. But—" and he flung his head up proudly, "Little John is not a liar. I know these men out there. I speak for them and for myself. I say, if you will forget we, too, will forget—and we are those who lose. Five of our brothers are stiff and dead on our toboggans even now. We were fools; we have paid the price. Now we would be friends."

Barry consulted his partner and the girl with a glance. What he read in their eyes evidently satisfied him, for he turned to the Indian with a smile, and extended his hand.

"We will be friends," he said slowly. "We trust the word of Little John."

Little John nodded gravely, and in turn shook the hands of all three.

XI

IN the big room of the store, the three of them sat around the stove silent. Much had been cleared up in the last two days, but still there was an awkward situation confronting them.

Jacquelin had found Little John's story hard to believe at first, but the Indian had supplied details and names that could be verified. It was a shock to her, of course, to learn that the man she had loved as her father was the murderer of her natural parents, and that the two partners Sadi had represented to her as whiskey runners who would debauch the Indians, were in reality decent, honorable and eminently likable men. She had written the birch bark note at Sadi's suggestion, in the hope that the warning would scare the two partners

away without bloodshed. And now—

Bravely, but with tears not far behind her dark eyes, she had apologized to Barry for all she had done, but Barry had only taken both her hands in his, and made her eyes meet his own.

"Do you think," he had said softly, "that I mind that—*now?*"

Jacquelin was disturbed, thrilled, and a little afraid of what she read in Barry's eyes, and she had changed the subject abruptly.

And now the girl was left with only the two partners to look after her. It was a situation that had to be met, but none of the trio was anxious to broach the subject. It was Barry who at last broke the uncomfortable silence.

"It strikes me, Shorty," he remarked with studied carelessness, "that you and I are in a way responsible for things being as they are here. It's up to us to see the thing through."

"Absolutely," nodded Shorty, with less glumness than usual.

"My idea would be to work our trap line from here," proposed Barry. "A few changes, and that could be worked out, I'm pretty sure. Jacquelin could have the house, and you and I could make our headquarters back in the store room."

"It is mighty kind of you," said Jacquelin in a soft voice, "to put yourself out in this way for me."

"It is nothing," protested Barry.

"Absolutely," nodded Shorty again.

"Well, then let us consider that settled," continued Barry. "We'll make our headquarters here, where we can keep an eye on things for you, Jacquelin, and then—in the spring—"

"And then—in the spring," mocked Shorty with a broadening smile, "I'll be losing my partner!"

Both Barry and Jacquelin flushed at the accusation, and glanced rather sheepishly at each other.

"How about it, Jacquelin?" asked Barry softly, after a momentary pause.

The girl's cheeks were burning, but she met Barry's inquiring glance bravely.

"Wouldn't it be nicer, Shorty," she said with a smile, "to say you *would gain* a partner in the spring?"