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THE LA CHANCE MINE MYSTERY

S. CARLETON

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"I STOOD UP AND DROVE FOR ALL I WAS WORTH, AND THE GIRL BESIDE ME SHOT, — AND HIT!" FRONTISPIECE. *See page 76.*

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THE LA CHANCE MINE MYSTERY

BY

S. CARLETON

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

GEORGE W. GAGE

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1920

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THE LA CHANCE MINE MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

I COME HOME: AND THE WOLVES HOWL

I am sick of the bitter wood-smoke,
And sick of the wind and rain:
I will leave the bush behind me,
And look for my love again.

LITTLE as I guessed it, this story really began at Skunk's Misery. But Skunk's Misery was the last thing in my head, though I had just come from the place.

Hungry, dog-tired, cross with the crossness of a man in authority whose orders have been forgotten or disregarded, I drove Billy Jones's old canoe across Lac Tremblant on my way home to Dudley Wilbraham's gold mine at La Chance, after an absence of months. It was halfway to dark, and the bitter November wind blew dead in my teeth. Slaps of spray from flying wave-crests blinded me with gouts of lake water, that was oddly warm till the cutting wind froze it to a coating of solid ice on

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my bare hands and stinging face, that I had to keep dabbing on my paddling shoulder to get my eyes clear in order that I might stare in front of my leaky, borrowed canoe.

To a stranger there might have seemed to be nothing particular to stare at, out on a lake where the world was all wind and lumpy seas and growing November twilight; but any one who had lived at La Chance knew better. By the map Lac Tremblant should have been our nearest gold route to civilization, but it was a lake that was no lake, as far as transport was concerned, and we never used it. The five-mile crossing I was making was just a fair sample of the forty miles of length Lac Tremblant stretched mockingly past the La Chance mine toward the main road from Caraquet—our nearest settlement—to railhead: and that was forty miles of queer water, sown with rocks that were sometimes visible as tombstones in a cemetery and sometimes hidden like rattlesnakes in a blanket. For the depth of Lac Tremblant, or its fairway, were two things no man might ever count on. It would fall in a night to shallows a child could wade through, among bristling needles of rocks no one had ever guessed at; and rise in a morning to the tops of the spruce scrub on its banks,—a sweet spread of water with not a rock to be seen. What hidden spring fed it was a mystery.

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But in the bitterest winter it was never cold enough to freeze, further than to form surging masses of frazil ice that would neither let a canoe push through them, nor yet support the weight of a man. Winter or summer, it was no thoroughfare—and neither was the ungodly jumble of swamp and mountains that stopped me from tapping the lower end of it—or I should not have spent the last three months in making fifty miles of road through untrodden bush to Caraquet, over which to transport the La Chance gold to a post-road and a railway: and it was no chosen return route of mine to La Chance now, either.

If I could draw you a map I should not have to explain the country. But failing that I will be as clear as I can.

The line of Lac Tremblant, and that of the road I had just made from Caraquet to La Chance, ran away from each other in two sides of a triangle,—except that the La Chance mine was five miles down the far side of the lake from Caraquet, and my road had to half-moon round the head of Lac Tremblant to get home—a lavish curve, too, by reason of swamps.

But it was on that half-moon road that I should have been now, if my order to have a horse meet me at the Halfway stables I had built at the beginning of it had not been for-

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gotten or disregarded by some one at La Chance.

Getting drenched to the skin with lake water was no rattling good exchange for riding home on a fresh horse that felt like a warm stove under me, but a five-mile short cut across the apex of the road and lake triangle was better than walking twenty-two miles along the side of it on my own legs—which was the only choice I had had in the matter.

I was obliged to get home, for reasons of my own; but when I walked in on Billy Jones, the foreman at the Halfway stables, that afternoon, after months of absence and road-making, there was not even a team horse in his stables, let alone my own saddle mare. There was not a soul about the place, either, but Billy himself, blandly idle and sprawling over a grubby old newspaper in front of the stove in his shack.

His welcome was heartening, but his intelligence was not. No one had told him a word about me or my mare, he informed me profanely; also that it was quite impossible for me to ride over to La Chance that night. There were not any work horses at the Halfway, because he had doubled up the teams for some heavy hauling from Caraquet, according to my orders sent over from Caraquet the week before, and no horses had been sent back

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from La Chance since. He guessed affably that some one might be driving over from the mine in the morning, and that after tramping from Caraquet I had better stay where I was for the night.

I hesitated. I was dog-tired for once in my life, but I had not done any tramp from Caraquet that day, if I had told the bald truth. Only I had no idea of telling it, nor any wish to explain to Billy Jones that I had been making a fool of myself elsewhere, doing a solid week of hospital nursing over a filthy boy I had found on my just-finished road the morning I had really left Caraquet. From the look of him I guessed he had got hurt cutting down a tree and not getting out of the way in time, though he was past telling me that or anything else. But I had also guessed where he lived, by the dirt on him, and was ass enough to carry him home to the squalid, half-French, half-Indian village the Caraquet people called Skunk's Misery.

It lay in the bush, in a slanting line between Caraquet and Lac Tremblant: a nest of thriftless evil stuck in a hollow you might pass within twenty yards of, and never guess held a house. Once there I had no choice but to stay and nurse the boy's sickening pain, till his mother came home from some place where she was fishing eels for the winter; for none of

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the rest of the population of fat-faced, indifferent women—I never saw a man, whether they were away in the lumber woods or not—would lay a hand on him. I will say plainly that I was more than thankful to hand him over to his mother. I had spilt over myself a bottle of some nameless and abominable brew that I'd mistaken for liniment, and my clothes smelt like carrion; also the lean-to I had lived in was so dirty that I scratched from suspicion all day long, except when I was yawning from a week of hardly closing my eyes. Altogether, as I said, I was dog-tired, if it were not from walking, and I might have stayed at Billy Jones's if I had not been crazy to get rid of my dirt-infected clothes. The worst reek had gone from them, but even out in the open air they smelt. I saw Billy Jones wrinkle up his nose to sniff innocently while he talked to me, and that settled me.

"I have to get home," I observed hastily. "Wilbraham expected me a week ago. But I don't walk any twenty-two miles! I'll take your old canoe and a short cut across the lake."

I was the only man who ever used Lac Tremblant, and the foreman of the Halfway stables cast a glance on me. "If it was me, I'd walk," he remarked drily. "But take your choice. The lake's a short cut right enough, only I wouldn't say where *to*—in my

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crazy old birchbark this kind of a blowing-up evening!"

That, and a few more things he said as he squinted a weather-wise eye on the lake, came back to me as I fought his old canoe through the water. And fighting it was, mind you, for the spray hid the rocks I knew, and the wind shoved me back on the ones I didn't know. Also the canoe was leaking till she was dead logy, and the gusts were so fierce I could not stop paddling to bail her. The short, vicious seas that snapped at me five ways at once were the color of lead and felt as heavy as cold molasses. But, for all that, crossing Lac Tremblant was saving me twenty-two miles on my feet, and I was not wasting any dissatisfaction on the traverse. Only, as I shoved the canoe forward, I was nearer to being played out, from one thing on top of another, than ever I was in my life. I pretended the paddle that began to hang in spite of me was only heavy with freezing spray and that the dead ache in my back was a kink. But I had to put every ounce there was in my six feet of weary bones into lightning-change wrenches to hold the old canoe head on to the splattering seas and keep her from swamping. I was very near to thinking I had been a fool not to have stayed with Billy Jones,—when I was suddenly aware of absolute, utter calm in the

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air that felt as warm on my face as if I'd gone into a house; of tranquil water under the forefoot of the canoe that had jumped forward under me as the resistance of the wind ceased; and of the lake shore—dark, featureless, silent—within twenty feet of me. I was across Lac Tremblant and in the shelter of the La Chance shore!

There is no good in denying that for five minutes all I did was to sit back and breathe. Then I lit my pipe, that was dry because it was inside my shirt; bailed the unnecessary water out of the canoe and the immediate neighborhood of my legs; and, without meaning to, turned a casual eye on the shore at my right hand.

It might have been because I was tired, but that shore struck me as if I had never seen it before; and on a November evening it was not an inviting prospect. Bush and bush, and more bush, grew down to the very verge of the water in a mass that spoke of heavy swamp and no landing. Behind that, I knew, was rising land, country rock, and again swamp and more swamp,—and all of it harsh, ugly, and inhospitable. But the queer thought that came over me was that it was more than inhospitable: it was forbidding. High over my head poured the bitter wind in a river of sound through the bare tree tops; close at hand it

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rustled with a flurry of dead leaves that was uncannily like the bustle of inimical businesses pursued insolently in the dark, at my very elbow; and suddenly, through and over all other sounds, there rose in the harsh gloom the long, ravening cry of a wolf.

Heaven knows I was used to the bush, and no howling was much to me; but you know how things come over you sometimes. It came over me then that I was sick of my life at La Chance; sick of working with Wilbraham and sicker still of washing myself in brooks and sleeping on the ground,—for I had not been in a house since August. Before I knew it I was speaking out loud as men do in books, only it was something I had thought before, which in books it generally isn't: "Scott, I'm a fool to stay here. I'd sooner go and work on day's wages somewhere and have a *place to go home to!*" And then I felt my face get red in the dark, for I knew what I meant, if you do not.

There was nothing to go home to at Wilbraham's, except a roof over my head, till circumstances sent me out into the bush again. In the daytime there were the mine and the mill. At night there was the bare living room of Wilbraham's shack, without a book, or a paper, or a decent chair; Wilbraham himself, fat, pig-headed, truculent, stumping the devil's sentry-go up and down the bare floor,

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talking eternally about himself and the mine, till a saint must have loathed the two of them; Thompson, the mine superintendent, silent, slow and stupid, playing ghastly solitaire games in a corner with a pack of dirty cards; and me, Nick Stretton, hunching myself irritably on a hard chair till I could decently go to bed. Even the bush was better than night after night of that,—and suddenly I felt my thoughts bursting out, even if I had sense enough to keep my mouth shut.

I was as sick of the bush as I was of the shack. I wanted a place of my own and a life of my own: and I was going to have it. There was nothing but old friendship to tie me to Wilbraham's; I could do as well anywhere else, and I was going there—to-morrow; going somewhere, anyhow, so that when my day's work was over I could go home to a blazing fire on a wide hearth, instead of Wilbraham's smelly stove where no one ever cleaned the creosote out of the pipe,—and where the girl I had had in my head for ten years would be waiting for me.

Don't imagine it was any girl I knew that I was thinking of; it was just a dream girl I meant to marry, when I found her. I'd never met such a girl anywhere, and it sounds like a fool to say I knew I was going to meet her: that she was waiting somewhere in the world

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for me, just as I was looking for her. I knew exactly what she must be like. She would have that waving bronze-gold hair that stands out in little separate, shining tendrils; eyes that startled you with their clear blue under dark, level eyebrows—I never look twice at a girl with arched brows—the rose-white, satin-smooth skin that goes with all of them, and she would move like —— Well, you've seen Pavlova move! Her voice—somehow one of the most important things I knew about her seemed to be her voice—would be the clear, carrying kind that always sounds gay. I was certain I should know my dream girl—first—by that. And that was the girl—I forgot it was all made-up child's play—who somewhere in the world was waiting for me, Nick Stretton; a fool with nothing on earth but six feet of a passably good body, and a dark, high-nosed face like an Indian's, who was working in the bush for Wilbraham instead of sieving creation for her. Well, I would start to-morrow; and, where the clean heavens meant me to, I should find her!

And with the words I came alive to the dark lake, and the leaky canoe I sat in, and the knowledge that all I had been thinking about a bronze-haired girl was just the cracked dream of a lonely man. Even if it had not been, and I could have started to look for a

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real girl to-morrow, I had to get back to Wilbraham's to-night. My drenched clothes were freezing on me, and I was hungrier than the wolf who had just howled again, as I picked up my slippery paddle and started for the La Chance landing.

There was no light there, naturally, since no one ever used the lake except myself, and I had been away for months; but as I rounded the point between the canoe and the landing, and slipped into the dark of its shadow, the lamplight from Wilbraham's living room shone out on me in a narrow beam, like a moon path on the water. As I crossed it and beached the canoe I must have been in plain sight to any one on the shore, though all I saw was the dark shingle I stepped upon. I stooped to lift the canoe out of water,—and I did what you mean when you say you nearly jumped out of your skin.

Touching my shoulder, her hand fiercely imperative in the dark, was a girl—at La Chance, where no girl had ever set foot!—and she was speaking to me with just that golden, carrying voice I knew would belong to my own dream girl, if she were keeping it down to a whisper.

"So you're here," was what she said; and it would have fitted in with the fool's thoughts I had just come out of, if it had not been for

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her tone. That startled me, till all I could do was to nod in the dark I could just see her in. I could not discern what she looked like, for her head was muffled in a shawl; and I never realized that all she could see of me was my height and general make-up, since my face must have been invisible where I stood in the shadow.

"You!" her golden voice stabbed like a dagger. "I won't have you staying here—where I am! I told you I'd speak to you when I could, and I'm speaking. You kept your word and disgraced me once, if I don't know how you did it; but I won't run the chance of *that* again! I'm safe here, except for you; and you've got to let me alone. If you don't, I—I ——" she stammered till I knew she was shaking, but she got hold of herself in the second. "You won't find it safe to play any tricks with the gold here—or me—if that's what you came for," she said superbly, "and you've given me a way to stop it. *That's* why I've sneaked out to meet you: not because I care for you. You must go away, or—I'll tell that you're here! Do you hear? I don't care what promises you make me—they always came easily to you. If you want me to hold my tongue about you, you've got to go. Go and betray me, if you like—but *go!*"

There was dead, cold hatred in it, the kind

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a woman has for a man she once cared for, and it staggered what wits I had left. I nodded like a fool, just as if I had known what she was talking about, and went on lifting the canoe ashore. Whether I really heard her give a terrified gasp I don't know; perhaps I only thought so. But as I put the canoe on the bank I heard a rustle, and when I looked up she was gone. There was nothing to tell me she had really even been there. It was just as probable that I was crazy, or walking in my sleep, as that a girl who talked like that—or even any kind of a girl—should be at La Chance. The cold, collected hatred in her voice still jarred me, since it was no way for even a dream girl to speak. But what jarred me worse was that the whole thing had been so quick I could not have sworn she had been there at all. I was honestly dazed as I walked up the rough path to Wilbraham's and my shack. I must have stood in front of it a good five minutes, with my wet clothes freezing as hard as a board, and the noise of the men in the bunk house down by the mine coming up to me on the night wind.

"'If I be I, as I should be, I've a little dog at home, and he'll know me,'" I said to myself at last like the old woman in the storybook, only with a grin. For when I went into the house there would be the neglected living room

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with the smelly stove, and Wilbraham walking up and down there as usual; and Dudley Wilbraham's conversation would bring any man back to his senses, even if he needed it worse than I did. I opened the shack door and went in,—and in the bare passage I jerked up taut.

The living room faced me,—and there was no stove in it. And no Wilbraham, walking up and down and talking to himself. There was a glowing, blazing log fire in a stone fireplace that must have been built while I was away; and, sitting alone before it, exactly as I had always thought of her, was my dream girl,—that I had meant to hunt the world for to welcome me home!

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CHAPTER II

MY DREAM: AND DUDLEY'S GIRL

ALL I could do was to stand in the living-room doorway and stare at her.

There she sat by the fire, in a short blue skirt that showed her little feet in blue stockings and buckled shoes, and a blue sweater whose rolling collar fell away from the column of her soft throat. And she was just exactly what I had known she would be! There was a gold crest to every exquisite, warm wave of her bronze hair; her level eyebrows were about five shades darker, and her curled-up eyelashes darker still, where she sat with her head bent over some sort of sewing. And even before she looked up and I saw her eyes, the beauty of her caught me at my heart. I had never thought even my dream girl could be as lovely as she was. But there was more to her face than beauty. It was so young and sweet and gay, and—when you looked hard at her—so sad, that I forgot I ought either to speak up or go away. Of who she was or how she came

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to be at La Chance, I had no earthly clue. I knew, of course, that it was she who had met me at the landing, and common sense told me she had taken me for some one else: but I had no desire to say so, or to go away either. And suddenly she looked up and saw me.

Whoever she was she had good nerves, for she never even stared as women do at a strange man. I could have been no reassuring vision either, standing there in moccasined feet that had come in on her as silently as a wolf or an Indian; with dirty, frozen clothes; and a face that the Lord knows is dark and hard at its best, and must have been forbidding enough that night between dirt and fatigue. But that girl only glanced at me as quietly as if she had known I was there.

"Did you —— Were you looking for any one?" she asked. And the second I heard her voice I knew she guessed she had spoken to me a quarter of an hour ago in words she would probably have given all she possessed to prevent a stranger from knowing she had need to speak to any one.

Only that was not the reason I half stammered, "Not exactly." It was because I could see her eyes,—and they were like sapphires, and the sea, and the night sky with the first stars in it. I snatched off my cap that I had forgotten, and bits of melting ice fell off it

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and tinkled on the floor. The sharp little sound brought my wits back to me. Perhaps I had never really thought my dream girl would come true, but once I had found her I never meant to lose her. And I knew, if I cared a straw for my life and the love that was to be in it, that I must meet her now *for the first time;* that nothing, not even if she told me so herself, must make me admit she had come to me at the lake by mistake, or that I had ever heard her voice before.

I said, easily enough, "I'm afraid I startled you. I'm Stretton, Wilbraham's partner"—which I was to the extent of a thousand dollars—"I've just come home."

And crazy as it sounds, I felt as if I had come home, for the first time in my life. For the girl of my dreams came to her feet with just that lovely, controlled ease you see in Pavlova, and with the prettiest little gesture of welcome.

"Oh, you're frozen stiff," she said with a kind of dismayed sympathy. "And I heard Mr. Wilbraham say some one had forgotten to send out your horse for you, and that you'd probably walk—the whole way from Caraquet! You must be tired to death. Please come to the fire and get warm—now you've come home!"

I thought of the queer smell that clung to

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my stained old coat and the company I had kept at Skunk's Misery—though if I had guessed what that wretched boy was going to mean to me I might have grudged my contact with him less—and I would not have gone near my dream girl for a fortune. "I think I'll get clean first," I began, and found myself laughing for the first time in a week. But as I turned away I glanced back from the dark passage where Charliet, the French-Canadian cook, was supposed to keep a lamp and never did, and saw the girl in the living room look after me,—with a look I had never seen in any girl's eyes, if I'd seen a hunted man have it.

"Gad, she knows I know she met me—and she doesn't mean to say so," I thought vividly. What the reason was I couldn't see, or whom there could be at La Chance that such a girl should find it necessary to tell that she would not have him disgrace her, and that he must go away. It made me wrathy to think there could be any one she needed to hit out at like that. But we had a queer lot at the mine, including Dunn and Collins, a couple of educated boys who had not been educated enough to pass as mining engineers, and had been kicked out into the world by their families. It might have been either of those two star failures in the bunk house. The only person it could not have been was Dudley Wilbraham;

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since aside from the fact that she could easily speak to him in the shack she could not have told him he must go away from his own mine. Which reminded me I'd never even asked where Dudley was or one thing about the mine I'd been away from so long.

But my dream girl, where no girl had ever been, was the only thing I could think of. I had meant to get some food and go to bed, but instead I threw my Skunk's Misery clothes out of the window, and got ready to go out to supper and see that girl again. Who under heaven she could be was past me, as well as how she came to be at La Chance. I would have been scared green lest she was the wife of some man at the mine, only she had no wedding ring on the slim left hand that had beckoned me to the fire. Yet, "She can't just be here alone, either, and I'm blessed if I see who she can have come with," I thought blankly. And I opened my room door straight on Marcia Wilbraham,—Wilbraham's sister!

"*Well,*" I said. It was the only thing that came to me. I knew immediately, of course, that the girl in the living room must have come out with Marcia; but it knocked me silly to see Marcia herself at La Chance. I had known Marcia Wilbraham, as I had known Dudley, ever since I wore blue serge knickerbockers trimmed with white braid. She never went

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anywhere with Dudley. She had money of her own, and she spent it on Horse Show horses, and traveling around to show them. But here she stood in front of me, in a forsaken backwoods mine that I should not have expected even Dudley himself to stay at if I had not known his reasons.

"I don't wonder you say 'well,'" Marcia returned crisply. She was good-looking in a big way, if you did not mind brown eyes that were too small for her face and a smile that showed her gums. I had never liked or disliked her especially, any more than you do any girl about your own age whom you've always known. "I've been here for three months! I was very near going home a month ago—but I don't think I'll go now. I believe I'll try a winter here."

"A winter!" I thought of Marcia "trying a winter," and I laughed.

"Oh, you needn't throw back your handsome Indian head to grin at me, Nicky Stretton," said she crossly. "I'm tired of always doing the same thing. And anyhow, the stable lost money, and I had to sell out!"

"But why stay here—with Dudley?" I let out. The two of them had always fought like cats.

"I'm going to do some shooting—and wolf hunting," Marcia smiled the ugly smile I never

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could stand. "I'm going to stay, anyhow; so you'll have to bear it, Nicky!"

"I'm—charmed!" I thought like lightning that my dream girl would do whatever Marcia did, and I blessed my stars she was staying; though I knew she would be all kinds of a nuisance if she insisted on turning out to hunt wolves. She was all but dressed for it even then, in a horrid green divided skirt that made her look like a fat old gentleman. But it was not Marcia I meant to talk about.

"Have you brought the—other girl—to hunt wolves, too?" I inquired, as we moved on down the passage; there was no upstairs to the shack.

"No," said Marcia quite carelessly, if I had not caught the snap in her eyes. "She's come to hunt Dudley! She's going to marry him."

"She's *what?*" I was suddenly thankful we had left the light from my open door and that Charliet despised keeping a lamp in the passage. The bland idea that I had found my dream girl split to bits as if a half-ton rock had landed on it. For her to be going to marry any one was bad enough; but *Dudley,* with his temper, and his drink, and the drugs I was pretty sure he took! The thing was so unspeakable that I stopped short in the passage.

Marcia Wilbraham stopped short too. "I don't wonder you're knocked silly," she said.

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"Here, come out of this; I want to speak to you, and I may as well do it now!" She pushed me into the office where Dudley did his accounts—which was his name for sitting drinking all day, and never speaking to any one—and shut the door. "Look here, Nicky, if you're thinking that girl is a friend of mine, she isn't! I don't know one thing about her. Except that this summer I had reason to oblige Dudley, and one day he came to me—you know he was in New York for nearly two months ——"

I nodded. I had not cared where he was, so that he was away from La Chance, where he and old Thompson would drive a tunnel just where I knew it was useless.

"Well, he came to me in the first of August, and said he was going to marry a girl called Paulette Brown,—and he wanted me to bring her out here! Why he didn't marry her straight off and bring her out here himself, I don't know; he only hummed and hawed when I asked him. But anyhow, I met Paulette Brown, *for the first time,* at the station, when we started up here—she and I and Dudley. And she puzzled me from the second we got into the Pullman, and I saw her pull off the two veils she'd worn around her head in the station! And she puzzles me worse now."

"Why?" I might have been puzzled my-

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self, remembering Paulette Brown's speech to me in the dark, but it was none of Marcia's business.

"Because I know I've seen her before," Marcia returned calmly, "only with no 'Paulette Brown' tacked on to her. I've seen her dance somewhere, but I can't think *where*—and that's the first thing that puzzles me."

"I don't see why," I said disagreeably, "considering that every one dances somewhere all day long just now."

"It wasn't that kind of dancing. It was rather—wonderful! And there was some story tacked on to it," Marcia frowned, "only I can't think what! And the second thing that puzzles me about Paulette Brown—I tell you, Nicky, I believe she can't *bear* Dudley, and that she doesn't want to marry him!"

It was the first decent thing I had heard from her, and I could have opened my mouth and cheered. But I said, "Then why's she here?"

"Just because it suits her for some reason of her own," Marcia was earnest as I had never seen her. "Nicky, I don't think she's anything in the world but some sort of an adventuress—only what I can't understand about her is what she wants of Dudley! It isn't money, for I know he's tried to make her take it, and she wouldn't. Yet I know, too, that

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she hadn't a cent coming up here, and she hasn't now—or even any clothes but summer things, and a blue sweater she wears all the time. She never speaks about herself, or where she comes from ——"

"I don't see why there should be any mystery about that!" It was a lie, but I might not have seen, if she had not spoken to me incomprehensibly in the dark. "Dudley probably knows all about her people."

"A girl called Paulette Brown doesn't have any people," scornfully. "Besides, her name isn't Brown, or Paulette—she used to forget to answer to either of them at first; and if Dudley knows what it really is, I'm going to know too—before I'm a month older! I tell you I've seen her before, and I know there was some kind of an ugly story tacked on to her and her dancing. That, and her real name, are up in the attic of my brain somewhere, and some day they'll come down!"

"Well, they won't concern me," I cut in stolidly. Whoever Paulette Brown was, if she were going to marry Dudley Wilbraham ten times over, she was the one girl in the world who belonged to me,—and I was not going to have her discussed by Marcia behind a shut door.

But Marcia's retort was too quick for me. "They may interest you, all the same, if that

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girl's what I think she is! Don't make any mistake, Nicky; she's no chorus girl out of work. She's a lady. Only—she's been something else, too! You watch how she uses a perfectly trained body."

I all but started. I had seen it already, when I thought she moved like Pavlova. "Anything else?" I inquired disagreeably.

"Yes," said Marcia quietly. "She's afraid for her life, or Dudley's—I can't make out which. Wait, and you'll see. Come on; we'll be late for supper. It would have been over hours ago if Dudley and I hadn't been out shooting this afternoon. We've only just come in."

But I was not thinking about supper. The Wilbrahams had been out, and Paulette Brown, left alone, had taken her chance to speak to some one. That she had happened to mistake her man and spoken to me made no difference in the fact, and it came too aptly on Marcia's suspicions about her. But "My good heavens, I won't care what she did," I thought fiercely. My dream girl's eyes were honest, if they were deep blue lakes a man might drown his soul in, too. If she were Dudley's twice over I was going to stand by her, because by all my dreams of her she was more mine. "I haven't time, or chances, to be watching pretty ladies," I said drily, "and I

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wouldn't bother over it myself if I were you. I'd let it go at plain Paulette Brown!"

"If you could," said Marcia, just as drily. And over her words, close outside the window, a wolf howled.

It startled me, as it had startled me once before that evening, only this time I knew the reason. "Scott, I never knew the wolves to be coming out so early in the season!" I was thankful to be back to things I could exclaim about. "And down here, beside the house, I never saw any!"

"No; so Dudley said," Marcia returned almost absently. She opened the door for herself, because I had forgotten it, and stood looking at the lighted living room at the end of the passage by the front door. "But the wolves have been round for a week—that was what I meant when I said I was going to have some wolf hunts! The mine superintendent's going to take me."

"Thompson!" I let out. Then I chuckled. Marcia was likely to have a great wolf hunt with Thompson, who knew no difference between a shotgun and a rifle, and would have legged it from a fox if he had met it alone.

"Marcia Wilbraham, I'll pay you five dollars if you ever get out wolf hunting with Thompson. Why, the only thing he *can* do for diversion is to play solitaire!"

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"Oh, him—yes," said Marcia carelessly and without grammar. "But I didn't mean old Thompson. He's been gone for a month, and we've a new man. His name's Macartney, and he's been here two weeks."

It was news to me, if it was also an example of the way Dudley Wilbraham ran his mine. But before I could speak Marcia nodded significantly down the passage to the living-room door. I had been looking into the room myself, as you do at the lighted stage in a theatre, and I had seen only one thing in it: my dream girl—whose name might or might not be Paulette Brown, whom Dudley Wilbraham had more right to than I had—sitting by the fire as I had left her, that fire I had dreamed I should come home to, just myself alone, and talking to Dudley. But Marcia had been looking at something else, and now my gaze followed hers.

A tall, lean, hard, capable-looking man stood on the other side of the fire. He was taking no share in the conversation between Dudley and the girl who had only lived in my dreams till to-night. He was watching the living-room door, quite palpably, and it struck me abruptly that I had not far to seek for Marcia Wilbraham's reason for staying the winter at La Chance. But I might have taken more interest in that and in Macartney, the new

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mine superintendent, too, if the girl sitting by the fire had not seen Marcia in the doorway and risen to her feet.

For she floated up, effortlessly, unconsciously, to the very tips of her toes, and stood so—like Pavlova!

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CHAPTER III

DUDLEY'S MINE: AND DUDLEY'S GOLD

I have stared my eyes blind for her,
Bridled my body alive for her,
Starved my soul to the rind for her—
Do I lose all?

The Lost Lover.

I COULD feel Marcia's satisfied, significant smile through the back of my neck as I shook hands with Dudley, and was introduced in turn to Miss Brown—the last name for her, even without the affected Paulette, though I might not have thought of it but for Marcia—and to Macartney, the new incumbent of Thompson's shoes. Dudley, little and fat, in the dirty boots he had worn all day, and just a little loaded, told me to wait till the morning or go to the devil, when I asked about the mine. Charliet banged the food on the table for supper—Marcia despised housekeeping, and if the living room had been reformed nothing else had—and I sat down in silence and ate. At least I shovelled food into my famished stomach. My attention was elsewhere.

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Paulette Brown sat beside Dudley. She was just twice as pretty as I had realized, even when the first sight of her struck me dumb. Her eyes were as dark as indigo, in the lamplight, and a marvellous rose color flitted in her cheeks as she spoke or was silent. She had wonderful hands, too, slim and white, without a sign of a bone at the wrists; but I had a curious feeling that they were the very strongest hands I had ever seen on a girl. Remembering Dudley, it hurt me to look at her; and suddenly something else hurt me worse, that I had been a fool not to have thought of before. Macartney, the mine superintendent, was new there; I knew no more of him than I did of Paulette Brown—not so much, perhaps, thanks to Marcia—and it came over me that he might have been the man for whom she had taken me to-night, and that it was he she had crept out into the dark to speak to in secret. I looked at him over my coffee cup, and there was something about him I did not like.

He was a tall man, very capable-looking, as I said; extremely fair and rather handsome, with hard, grayish eyes that looked straight at you when he spoke. He had a charming laugh—yet when he laughed I saw suddenly what it was that I did not like about him; and it was nothing more nor less than a certain set look about his eye muscles. Some gamblers

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have it, and it did not strike my fancy in the new mine superintendent at La Chance. But watch as I might, I saw no sign of an understanding between him and my dream girl. It was impossible to be sure, of course, but I was nearly sure. She spoke to him as she spoke to Marcia and Dudley—she never addressed one word to me—just easily and simply, as people do who live in the same house. Macartney himself talked mostly to Marcia, which was no business of mine. Only I was somehow curiously thankful that it had not been Macartney whom Paulette had meant to meet in the dark. There was something about his eyes that said he was no safe customer for any girl to speak to with hatred,—especially a girl whom another girl was watching, as Marcia was watching Paulette Brown. I decided it must have been either Dunn or Collins—our two worthless Yale boys at the mine—whom she had wanted to get rid of, and I felt better; for it would be easy enough to save her trouble by doing that myself. They might just have come back to La Chance like me, for all I knew, because Dudley had a trick of sending the men heaven knew where to prospect.

It was rot, anyhow, to be taking a girl's affairs so seriously. I looked at my dream girl's clear eyes, and thought that if she knew what Marcia and I were thinking about her she

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might have good reason to be angry. Also that Dudley probably knew all about her evening stroll and what she was doing at La Chance, if Marcia did not. And Dudley's self-important voice cut through my thoughts like a knife:

"Where on earth were you this evening, Paulette?" he was demanding irritably. "I couldn't see a sign of you when Marcia and I went out, and you weren't anywhere when we came in!"

"I don't know"—the girl began—and I saw the color go out of her face, and it made me angry.

"I can tell you where Miss Brown was," I said deliberately, "if she's ashamed to own it. She was good and settled by this fire."

Why I lied for her I could not say. But the glance she turned on me gave me a flat sort of feeling, as if Marcia might be right and she was there for reasons of her own that I had all but stumbled on by accident. I was a fool to care; but then I had been a fool all day with my silly thoughts of leaving La Chance to chase the world for an imaginary girl, and more fool still to think I had found her there waiting for me. I said something about being tired and went off to bed. I was tired, right enough, but I was something else too. All that business about the girl I meant to find and

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marry may sound like a child's silly game to you, but it had been more than a game to me. It had been a solid prop to hold to in ugly places where a man might slip if he had not clean love and a girl in his head. And now, at seven-and-twenty, I wanted my child's game to come true: just my own fire, and my own girl, and a life that held more than mere slaving for money. And it had come true, as far as the fire and the welcome home; only the girl was another man's.

I knew what I ought to do was to get out of La Chance, but I could not screw myself up to the acceptance of the obvious fact that there were other girls in the world than Paulette Brown. I told myself I was too dead tired to care. I stumbled to my window to open it—Charliet's lamp had burned out while I was at supper and the room was stifling—and a sudden queer sense that some one or something was under my window made me stand there without raising it. And there was some *thing*, anyway. The windows in the shack were about a yard above the ground. There was a glimpse of the moon through the wind-tortured clouds, now on the rough clearing, now on the thick spruces round the edge of it,—for my window looked on the bush, not toward the bunk house and the mine. And as the moonlight flickered back on the clearing I saw my

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clothes I had worn at Skunk's Misery and tossed out for Charliet to burn because they smelled,—and something else that made me stare in pure surprise.

There was a wolf—gaunt, gray, fantastic in the moonlight—rolling on my clothes; regardless of the human eyes on him and within ten feet of the house. It was so crazy that I almost forgot the girl Marcia had said was only "called" Paulette Brown. I jerked up the window and stood waiting for the wolf to run. And it did not take the least notice of me. I could have shot it ten times over, but the thing was so incredible that I only stood staring; and suddenly my chance was gone. The beast picked up my coat, as a dog does a bone, and disappeared with it like a streak into the black bush.

"Scott, I never saw a wolf behave like that!" I thought. But one more impossibility in an impossible day did not matter. I left the window open and tumbled into bed.

I would have forgotten the thing in the morning, only that when I got up *all* my Skunk's Misery clothes had disappeared, and Charliet had not taken them, because I asked him. I did not mention last night's wolf to him, because I was in a hurry to catch Dudley and tell him I meant to leave La Chance. But I did not tell him, for when I thought of leav-

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ing my dream girl to him it would not come to my tongue. An obstinate, matter-of-fact devil got up in my heart instead and prompted me to stay just where I was. I looked at Dudley—little, fat, pompous, and so self-opinionated that it fairly stuck out of him—and thought that if I had a fair chance I could take my dream girl from him. I might be dark as an Indian and without a cent to my name except the few dollars I had sunk in the mine, but I did not drink or eat drugs; and I knew Dudley did one and guessed he did the other. Interfering with him was out of the question, of course; it was not a thing any man could do to his friend, deliberately. I supposed he would be good to the girl, according to his lights. But, all the same, I decided to stay at La Chance. I saw Dudley was brimming over with something secret, and I hoped to heaven it was not his engagement, and that I should not have to stand my own thoughts of a girl translated into Dudley's. But he did not mention her. He hooked his fat wrist into my elbow and trotted me down to the mine.

It was an amateur sort of mine, as you may have gathered. Dudley had no use for expert assistance or for advice. And it was a simple looking place. The shore of Lac Tremblant there ran back flat to a hill, a quarter of a mile

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from the water, with a solid rock face like a cliff. Along that cliff face came first Dudley's shack, then Thompson's tunnel, then—a good way farther down—the bunk house, the mill, and a shanty Dudley called the assay office. But I stared at a new hole in the cliff, farther down even than the assay office.

"Why, you've driven a new tunnel," I exclaimed.

"Yes, my young son," said Dudley; and then he burst out with things. Macartney had run that new tunnel as soon as he came and struck quartz that was solid for heaven knew how far, and carrying thick, free gold that assayed incredibly to the ton. The La Chance mine, whose name had been more truth than poetry—for when I made fifty miles of road that cost like the devil, to haul in machinery and a mill it was pitch and toss if we should ever need it—had turned out a certainty while I was away.

I stood silent. It meant plenty to me, who had only a trifle in the thing, but I was the only soul in the world who knew what it meant to Dudley. Stocks, carelessness, but chiefly bull-headed extravagance, had run through every cent he had, and La Chance had saved him from having to live on Marcia's charity,—if she had any. There was no fear, either, of his being interfered with in the bonanza he

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had struck; for leaving out my infinitesimal share, Dudley was sole owner,—and he had bought a thousand acres mining concession from the Government for ten dollars an acre, which is the law when a potential mining district in unsurveyed territory is more than twenty miles by a wagon road from a railway. All he had to do with would-be prospectors was to chuck them out. He had got in ten stamps for his mill over the road I had built from Caraquet, and—since Macartney arrived—was milling stuff whose net result made me stare, after the miserable, two-dollar ore old Thompson had broken my heart with.

"So you see, we're made," Dudley finished simply. "Macartney struck his vein first go off, and we'll be able to work it all winter. You'd better start in to-day and get some snowsheds built along the face of the workings—they ought to have been started a week ago. Why in the devil"—drink and drugs do not make a man easy to work with, and you never knew when Dudley might turn on you with a face like a fiend—"didn't you get back from Caraquet before? You'd nothing to keep you away this last week!"

"I'd plenty," I returned drily. "And I may remind you that I didn't propose to have to walk back!" It was the first time I had mentioned my missing horse. I did not men-

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tion my stay in Skunk's Misery: it was a side show of my own, to my mind, and unconnected with Dudley,—though I ought to have known that nothing in life is ever a side show, even if you can't see the door from the big tent.

"Oh, your horse," said Dudley more civilly. "I didn't think I'd forgotten about it, but I suppose I must have. I was a good deal put out getting Thompson off."

"What happened about him?" I had had no chance to ask before.

"Oh, I never could stand him," and I knew it was true. "Sitting all the evening playing cards like a performing dog! And he wasn't fit for his work, either. I told him so, and he said he'd go. He went out to Caraquet nearly a month ago—I thought you knew. D'ye mean you didn't see him going through?"

I shook my head. It was a wonder I had not, for I had spent most of last month fussing over some bad places on the road, by the turn where I had found my boy from Skunk's Misery, and I ought to have seen Thompson go by. But the solution was simple. There was one Monday and Tuesday I had my road gang off in the bush, on the opposite side from the Skunk's Misery valley, getting stuff to finish a bit of corduroy. In those two days I could have missed seeing Thompson, and I said so.

"You didn't miss much," Dudley returned

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carelessly. "This Macartney's a long sight better man."

"Where'd you get him?" I was pretty sure it was not Macartney for whom my dream girl had mistaken me in the dark, but there was no harm in knowing all I could about him.

Dudley knocked the wind straight out of my half suspicion.

"Thompson sent him," he returned with a grin. "I told him to get somebody. Oh, we parted friends all right, old Thompson and I! He saw, just as I did, that he wasn't the man for the place. Macartney struck that vein first go off, and that was recommendation enough for me. But here's Thompson's, if you want to see it!" He extracted a folded letter from a case.

It was written in Thompson's careful, back-number copperplate, perhaps not so careful as usual, but his unmistakably. And once and for all I dismissed all idea that it could have been Macartney who was tangled up with Paulette Brown. Old Thompson's friends were not that sort, and he vouched for knowing Macartney all his life. He was a well-known man, according to Thompson, with a long string of letters after his name. Thompson had come on him by accident, and sent him up at once, before he was snapped up elsewhere.

"Thompson seems to have got a move on in

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sending up his successor," said I idly. "When did he write this?" For there was no envelope, and only Montreal, with no date, on the letter.

"Dunno—first day he got to Montreal, it says," carelessly. "Come along and have a look at the workings. I want you to get log shelters built as quick as you can build them—we don't want to have to dig out the new tunnel mouth every time it snows. After that you can go to Caraquet with what gold we've got out and be gone as long as you please. Now, we may have snow any day."

I nodded. The winter arrives for good at La Chance in November, and besides the exposed tunnel mouth, there was no shelter over the ore platform at the mill. This year the snow was late, but there was no counting on that. And I blinked as I went out of the white November sunshine into Macartney's new tunnel, and the candlelight of his humming stope. One glance around told me Dudley was right, and the man knew his business; and it was the same over at the mill. It seemed to me superintendent was a mild name for Macartney, and general manager would have fitted better. But I said nothing, for Dudley considered he was general manager himself. Another thing that pleased me about the new man was that he seemed to be doing

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nothing, till you saw how his men jumped for him, while Thompson had never been able to keep his hands off the men's work. There was none of that in Macartney; and if he had struck me as capable the night before he looked ten times more so now, as he placidly ran four jobs at once.

He was a good-looking figure of a man, too, in his brown duck working clothes, and I did not wonder Marcia Wilbraham had taken a fancy to him. Dudley would probably be blazing if he caught her philandering with his superintendent, but it was no business of mine. And anyhow, Macartney had my blessing since it could not be he to whom Paulette Brown had meant to speak the night before. That ought to have been none of my business either, and to get it out of my head I turned to Dudley, fussing round and talking about tailings. And one omission in all he and Macartney had shown me hopped up in my head. "Where's your gold?" I demanded.

"That's one thing we don't keep loose on the doorsteps," Macartney returned drily, and I rather liked him for it, since he knew nothing of my share in the mine.

But Dudley snapped at him: "Why can't you say it's in the house—in my office? Stretton's going to take it into Caraquet; there's no sense in making a mystery to him. Come on,

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Stretton, and have a look at it now!" He stuck his fat little arm through mine, and we went back to the house by the back door and Charliet's untidy kitchen. It was the shortest way, and it was not till afterwards that I remembered it was not commanded by the window in his office, like the front way. I was not keen on going; later I had a sickly feeling that it was because I had a presentiment of seeing something I did not want to see. Then all I thought was that I had a hundred other things to do, and though I went unwillingly, I went.

"The gold's in my safe, in boxes," Dudley said on the way, "and that I'm not going to undo. But I've a lump or two in my desk I can show you."

"Lying round loose?" I shrugged my shoulders.

"No, it's locked up. But no one ever comes in here but me, and"—he gave a shove at the office door that seemed to have stuck,—"and Miss Brown!"

But I was speechless where I stood behind him. There was the bare office; Dudley's locked desk; Dudley's safe against the wall. And turning away from the safe, in her blue sweater and blue skirt and stockings and little buckled shoes, was my dream girl!

Something in my heart turned over as I looked at her. It was not that she had started,

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for she had not. She just stood in front of us, poised and serene, and some sort of a letter she had been writing lay half finished on Dudley's desk. But something totally outside me told me she had been writing no letter while we were out; that she knew the combination of the safe; had opened it; had but just shut it; and—*that she had been doing something to the boxes of gold inside it.*

There was nothing in her face to say so, though, and my thought never struck Dudley. He gave her a nod and a patronizing: "Well, nice girl," without the least surprise at seeing her there. But I had seen a pin dot of blue sealing wax on the glimpse of white blouse that showed through the open front of her sweater, and something else. I stooped, while Dudley was fussing with the lock of his desk, and picked up a curious little gold seal that lay on the floor by the safe.

Whether I meant to speak of it or not I don't know; for quick as light, the girl held out her hand for it. I said nothing as I gave it to her. Dudley did not see me do it; and, of course, it might have been a seal of his own. But, if it were, why did not Paulette Brown say so,—or say something—instead of standing dead white and silent till I turned away?

I knew—as I said "Oh" over Dudley's gold, and my dream girl slipped out of the

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room—that I had helped her to keep some kind of a secret for the second time. And that if she had any mysterious business at La Chance it was something fishy about Dudley's gold

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CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN THE DARK

It sounded crazy, for what could a girl like that do to gold that was securely packed? But women had been mixed up in ugly work about gold before, and somehow the vision of my dream girl standing by the safe stuck to me all that day. Suppose I had helped her to cover up a theft from Dudley! It was funny; but the ludicrous side of it did not strike me. What did was that I must see her alone and get rid of the poisonous distrust of her that she, or Marcia, had put into my head. But that day went by, and two more on top of it, and I had no chance to speak to Paulette Brown.

Part of the reason was that I had not a second to call my own. La Chance had been an amateur mine when we began it, and it was one still. There was only Dudley—who did nothing, and was celebrating himself stupid with drugs, or I was much mistaken—Macartney, and myself to run it; with not enough men

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even to get out the ore, without working the mill and the amalgam plates. It had been no particular matter while the whole mine was only a tentative business, and I had been having half a fit at Dudley's mad extravagance in putting up a ten-stamp mill when we had nothing particular to crush in it. But now, with ore that ran over a hundred to the ton being fed into the mill, and Macartney and I doing the work of six men instead of two, I agreed with Dudley when he announced in a sober interval that we required a double shift of men and the mill to crush day and night, instead of stopping at dark,—besides a cyanide plant and a man to run it.

But Macartney unexpectedly jibbed at the idea. He returned bluntly that he could attend to the cyanide business himself, when it was really needed; while as to extra men he could not watch a night shift at the plates as well as a day one, and he would have to be pretty sure of the honesty of his new amalgam man before he started in to get one. Also—and it struck me as a sentiment I had never heard from a mine superintendent before—that if we sent out for men half of those we got might be riffraff and make trouble for us, without so much as a sheriff within a hundred miles. "I'd sooner pick up new men one at a time," he concluded, "even if it takes a month.

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We've ladies here, and if we got in a gang of tramps ——" he gave a shrug and a significant glance at Dudley.

"Why, we've some devils out of purgatory now," I began scornfully, and stopped,—because Dudley suddenly agreed with Macartney. But the waste of time in making the mine pay for itself and the stopping of the mill at night galled me; and so did the work I had to do from dawn to dark, because any two-dollar-a-day man could have done it instead.

Macartney seemed to be made of iron, for he took longer hours than I did. But he could talk to Marcia Wilbraham in the evenings, while Dudley stood between me and the dream girl I thought had come true for me when first I came to La Chance.

I watched her, though; I couldn't help it. There were times when I could have sworn her soul matched her body and she was honest all through; and times when a devil rose up in me and bade me doubt her; till between work and worry I was no nearer finding out the kind she really was than to discovering the man she had meant to speak to in the dark the night she blundered on me. Yet I had some sort of a clue there, if it were not much of one. Dunn and Collins, our two slackers who had been kicked out of Yale to land in our bunk house, evidently had some game on. Dunn I was not

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much bothered about: he was just a plain good-for-nothing, with a perennial chuckle. But Collins was a different story. Tall, pale, long-eyelashed, his *blasé* young face barely veiled a mind that was an encyclopædia of sin, —or I was much mistaken. And he and Dunn had suddenly ceased to raise Hades in the bunk house every night and developed a taste for going to bed with the hens. At least, the snoring bunk house thought so. If they went abroad instead on whatever they were up to, I never caught them at it; but I did catch them watching *me,* like lynxes, whenever they were off shift. I never saw either of them speak to Miss Brown, but I got a good growing idea it was just Collins she had meant to interview the night she spoke to me: and it fitted in well enough with my doubts about her and Dudley's gold, for I would have put no gold stealing past Collins. As for Paulette Brown herself, I could see no earthly sense in Marcia's silly statement that "she was afraid for her life—or Dudley's." She was afraid *of* Dudley, I could see that; for she shrank from him quite often. But on the other hand, I saw her follow him into his office one night, when he was fit for no girl to tackle, and try to get him to listen to something. From outside I heard her beg him to "please listen and try to understand"—and I made her a sign from the door-

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way to come away before he flew at her. I asked her if there were anything I could do, and she said no; it was only something she wanted to tell Dudley. But suddenly she looked at me with those clear eyes of hers. "You're very—good to me," she said rather piteously.

I shook my head, and that minute I believed in her utterly. But the next night I had a jar. I was starting for Caraquet the morning after, with the gold Dudley had in his office, so I was late in the stable, putting washers on my light wagon, and came home by a short cut through the bush, long after dark. If I moved Indian-silent in my moccasins it was because I always did. But—halfway to the shack clearing—I stopped short, wolf-silent; which is different. Close by, invisible in the dark spruces, I heard Paulette Brown speaking; and knew that once more she was meeting a man in the dark, and, this time, the right one! I could not see him any more than I could hear him, for he did not speak; but I knew he was there. I crouched to make a blind jump for him—and my dream girl's voice held me still.

"I don't care how you threaten me: you've got to *go*," she said doggedly. "I know I've my own safety to look after, but I'll chance that. I'll give you one week more. Then, if you dare to stay on here, and interfere with me

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or the gold or anything else, I'll confess everything to Dudley Wilbraham. I nearly did it last night. I *won't* trust you—even if it means your giving away my hiding place to the police!"

Whoever she spoke to moved infinitesimally in the dark. He must have muttered something I could not hear, for the girl answered sharply: "As for that, I'm done with you! Whether you go or don't go, this is the last time I'll ever sneak out to meet you. When you dare to say you love me"—and once more the collected hatred in her voice staggered me, only this time I was thankful for it—"I could die! I won't hear of what you say, remember, but I'll give you one week's chance. Then—or if you try anything on with me and the gold —I'll tell!"

There was no answer. But my blood jumped in me with sheer fury, for answer or no answer, I knew who the man beside her was. Close by me I heard Dunn's unmistakable chuckle: and where Dunn was Collins was too. I behaved like a fool. I should have bounced through the bush and grabbed Dunn at least, which might have stopped some of the awful work that was to come. But I stood still, till a sixth sense told me Collins was gone, just as I could have gone myself, without sound or warning. Yet even then I paused

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instead of going after him. First, because I had no desire to give my reason for dismissing him next morning; second, because I had a startling, ghastly thought that I'd heard Macartney's quiet, characteristic footstep moving away,—and if a hard, set-eyed man like our capable superintendent had been out listening to what a girl said to Collins, as I had, I didn't know how in the devil I was to make him hold his tongue about it. And in the middle of that pleasant thought my dream girl spoke again, to herself this time: "Oh, I can't trust him! I'll have to get hold of the gold myself—at least all I've marked."

On the top of her words a wolf howled startlingly, close by. It was evidently the last touch on what must have been a cheerful evening, for Paulette Brown gave one appalled spring and was gone, fleeing for the kitchen door. I am not slow on my feet. I was in the front way before she struck the back one. From the front door I observed the living room, and what I saw inside it before I strolled in there made me catch my breath with relief and comforting security for the first time that night. Macartney could not have been out listening in the dark, if I had. He sat lazily in the living room, talking to Marcia, with his feet in old patent leather shoes he could never have run in, even if it had not been plain he had

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not been out-of-doors at all. Marcia had evidently not been spying either, which was a comfort; and Dudley was out of the question, for he dozed by the fire, palpably half asleep. But suddenly I had a fright. The girl who entered the living room five minutes behind me had very plainly been out; and I was terrified that Marcia would notice her wind-blown hair. I spoke to her as she passed me. "You're losing a hairpin on the left side of your head," was all I said. And much I got for it. My dream girl tucked in her wildly flying curl with that sleight of hand women use and never even looked at me. But the thing was done, and I had covered up her tracks for the third time.

I decided to fire Collins before breakfast the next morning and get off to Caraquet straight after. But I didn't; and I did not fire Collins, either. When I went to the bunk house and then to the mine, where he was a rock man, he had apparently fired himself, as Paulette had told him to. He was nowhere to be found, anyhow, or Dunn either. I wasted an hour hunting for him, and after that Macartney wanted me, so that it was late afternoon before I could load up my gold and get off. And as I opened the safe in Dudley's office I swore.

There were four boxes of the stuff; small, for easy handling; and if I had had time I would have opened every hanged one of them.

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Even as it was, I determined to do no forwarding from Caraquet till I knew what something on them meant. For on each box, just as I had expected even before I heard Paulette Brown say she had marked them, was a tiny seal in blue wax!

The reason for any seal knocked me utterly, but I couldn't wait to worry over it. No one else saw it, for I loaded the boxes into my wagon myself, and there was nobody about to see me off. Dudley was dead to the world, as I'd known he was getting ready to be for a week past; Marcia, to her fury, had had to retire to bed with a swelled face; and Macartney was the only other person who knew my light wagon and pair of horses was taking our clean-up into Caraquet,—except Paulette Brown!

And there was no sign of her anywhere. I had not expected there would be, but I was sore all the same. I had helped her out of difficulties three times, and all I'd got for it was—nothing! I saw Macartney coming up from the mill, and yelled to him to come and hold my horses, while I went back to my room for a revolver. This was from sheer habit.

The snow still held off, and before me was nothing more exciting than a cold drive over a bad road that was frozen hard as a board, a halt at the Halfway stables to change horses, and

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perhaps the society of Billy Jones as far as Caraquet,—if he wanted to go there. The only other human being I could possibly meet might be some one from Skunk's Misery, though that was unlikely; the denizens of Skunk's Misery had few errands that took them out on roads. So I pocketed my gun mechanically. But as I went out again I stopped short in the shack door.

My dream girl, whom I'd never been alone with for ten minutes, sat in my wagon, with my reins in her hands. "My soul," I thought, galvanized, "she can't be—she must be—coming with me to Caraquet!"

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CHAPTER V

THE CARAQUET ROAD: AND THE WOLVES HOWL ONCE MORE

Why comest thou to ride with me?
"The road, this night, is dark."
Dost thou and thine then side with me?
"Ride on, ride on and hark!"
The Night Ride.

THERE she sat, anyhow, alone except for Macartney, who stood at the horses' heads. Wherever she was going, I had an idea he was as surprised about it as I was, and that he had been expostulating with her about her expedition. But, if he had, he shut up as I appeared. I could only stammer as I stared at Paulette, "You—you're not coming!"

"I seem to be," she returned placidly. And Macartney gave me the despairing glance of a sensible man who had tried his best to head off a girl's silly whim, and failed.

"It's as you like," he said—to her, not to me. "But you understand you can't get back to-night, if you go to Caraquet. And—Good heavens—you ought *not* to go, if you want the

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truth of it! There's nothing to see—and you'll get half frozen—and you mayn't get back for days, if it snows!"

Paulette Brown looked at him as if he were not there. Then she laughed. "I didn't say I was going to Caraquet! If you want to know all about my taking a chance for a drive behind a pair of good horses, Miss Wilbraham wants Billy Jones's wife to come over for a week and work for her. I'm going to stay all night with Mrs. Jones and bring her back in the morning. She'll never leave Billy unless she's fetched. So I really think you needn't worry, Mr. Macartney," she paused, and I thought I saw him wince. "I'm not going to be a nuisance either to you or Mr. Stretton," and before he had a chance to answer she started up the horses. I had just time to take a flying jump and land in the wagon beside her as she drove off.

Macartney exclaimed sharply, and I didn't wonder. If he had not jumped clear the near wheels must have struck him. I lost the angry, startled sentence he snapped out. But it could have been nothing in particular, for my dream girl only turned in her seat and smiled at him.

I had no smile as I took the reins from her. I had wanted a chance to be alone with her, and I had it: but I knew better than to think

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