



## H. A. Cody

# The Chief of the Ranges: A Tale of the Yukon

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# AT LAST THE END.

#### CHAPTER I

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#### THE RAIDERS

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The crooked river wound its lazy way between gently shelving banks. The pebbles along the shore sparkled like mirrors beneath the sun's bright rays. The whole land stood agleam on this fair summer afternoon in the far Canadian Northland. Only a gentle whisper rose from the dark forest as the drifting breeze stirred the crests of battalions of rugged spruce and fir trees. The wind, floating along the river and rippling the surface of the water, caused the small canoe lying near the shore to chafe fretfully upon the beach.

Owindia, seated well astern, played one small brown hand in the stream. The breeze, touching her loose dark hair, tossed it over her cheeks and forehead in rich confusion. Listlessly she leaned against the side of the canoe, looking down dreamily into the clear depths beneath.

The river, wind and forest were all like herself—creatures of freedom. She knew them in their days of austerity and coldness as well as in times of peace and repose. In winter and summer, in storm and sunshine, they had always been her companions, and she loved them with the deep affection of her ardent nature.

Of what was she thinking as she sat there in the sunshine, idly dabbling in the water? Was it of some bright event in her young life of sixteen summers? Or was it a vision, lying golden in the far-off future? Perhaps she was

thinking of her father and wondering when he would return from the chase. Whatever it was the picture was evidently bright which filled her mind, for occasionally her lips parted in a sweet smile. No sense of fear was hers, and no dark forebodings disturbed her quiet repose. So full of joy had been her life that only the outward aspect had been presented to her view. She knew nothing of the many strange, subtle ways within, of darkness, misery, cruelty, and death. The noble forest on her right was brilliant outwardly, but she could not see within its secret depths, nor through its long, sombre arches. Had it been possible the dreamy expression would have faded from her eyes, and the happy smile would have left her lips. What connection those crouching forms. slinkina beneath outspreading branches, with the peace of that summer day? The venomous serpent crawling through the tall grass can change in an instant the child's joyous laughter to shrieks of terror.

A slight noise among the trees fell upon Owindia's keen ears, causing her to glance quickly around. Seeing nothing unusual she resumed her former position. It was only a rabbit, no doubt, or a squirrel skurrying along the ground. But her interest had become aroused, and once again her eyes searched the dark recesses. As she did so she leaped to her feet, and stood for an instant with the startled expression of a hunted animal. Then from her lips came a wild cry of alarm, as she sprang from the canoe, and darted rapidly along the shore. Occasionally she glanced back over her shoulder, and each time the sight urged her to greater speed. Yes, they were coming with long swinging lopes.

Monsters they seemed to the terrified girl, and when she heard their hideous laughter as they steadily gained upon her a sickening dread possessed her. What had become of that bright sunny face? Where were those dreamy eyes? Surely this was not the maiden who had reclined so gracefully in the canoe but a short time before.

Owindia had rounded a bend now, and there ahead appeared a frail rude lodge. Before it stood a woman, who gazed with wonder upon the wild-eyed girl rushing toward her, and screaming in frenzied tones "Chilcats! Chilcats!" Then she caught sight of the pursuers, and with a cry she started forward, reached the maiden, and enfolded her in her arms. Half carrying and half dragging she hurried Owindia toward the lodge, and had only time to thrust her through the opening used as a door when the two braves leaped upon her and endeavoured to hurl her aside. The woman was aroused to the wildest fury. She struggled and fought with her bare-limbed antagonists. She writhed and twisted in their merciless grasp. Her sharp finger nails left streaming red scars wherever she touched their bodies, and her firm white teeth sank deep into the quivering flesh. She was more than a mere woman now; she was a mother fighting for her only child against the overpowering force of brutal passion.

Leaving his companion to contend alone outside with this fury of a woman, the taller Indian freed himself, entered the lodge, caught Owindia in his arms, and started to make his escape by bursting through the rear of the lodge. From the maiden's lips arose shrieks of the wildest terror, and vainly she endeavoured to tear herself away from her captor. But

he held her firm, and smothered her cries by placing one big, dirty hand over her mouth.

No sooner did the mother realise what was taking place within the lodge than she loosened her hold upon her adversary, and sprang to the rescue of her daughter. Owindia's captor saw her coming, and, knowing what a close contact would mean, he gave her a brutal kick as she approached. For an instant the woman struggled to maintain her ground, but her brain reeled, a mist rose before her eyes, and she sank to the earth, striking heavily upon a sharp stone as she fell.

The raiders were now free from this turbulent mother, and a harsh laugh of scorn broke from their lips as they looked upon the prostrate form. No sense of pity stirred their hearts, for was not this woman one of the despised Ayana tribe? But with the girl it was different. She was beautiful, and they needed her.

Owindia no longer struggled, but lay like a crushed flower in those gripping arms. She glanced at her mother lying helplessly before her, and then into the faces of her captors. But no sign of mercy could she detect in their greedy, lustful eyes. No hope could she expect from them. They would carry her away beyond the mountains down to the coast, and what then? Had not her father and mother often told her of the raids the Chilcats had made in days past, when wives and daughters had been ruthlessly snatched away, never more to return to their own people? Had she not pictured it all in her mind—the terror, despair and the long years of heart-breaking life among that ferocious tribe? Had she not at times, even as a child, started up in alarm in the

dead of night thinking the Chilcats were upon her? And now it had come to pass. It was no longer a dream, but a terrible reality.

With their precious booty thus secured, the Chilcats turned toward the silent forest at their back. They had taken but a few steps forward when out from amid the trees leaped a gigantic native, and with a wild cry of rage and bereavement rushed toward the raiders. The Indian bearing the maiden dropped his burden upon the ground, and endeavoured to seize the small hatchet hanging at his waist. His efforts were in vain, for the next instant he was stretched full length upon the earth, with his thick skull shattered by a blow that would have rent a rock in twain. His companion, by a tremendous sideward bound, escaped a like fate and sped off nimbly into the forest, and escaped from view.

The victor did not attempt to follow the retreating Chilcat, but stood like a statue over his fallen victim. A rage, wild and ungoverned, possessed his soul. His eyes gleamed with the fury of a lioness bereft of her cubs. His great breast lifted and fell, telling plainly of the storm raging within. The muscles of his long tense right arm stood out like cords of thrice-twisted hemp. With a grip of steel his fingers clutched the haft of his hunting axe. At his feet lay the dead Chilcat. What did it matter that life was extinct in that prostrate form? He was of the hated race, the people who for long years had been grinding down the Ayana. It was something to have even one of their dead so near him now. Lifting high his axe he smote again and again that quivering body. His fury increased at every stroke. It was not one Chilcat he was

smiting, but the whole race. He paused at length and looked around as if expecting enemies from every quarter. He glanced toward the forest and the shore, and at last beheld his daughter crouched upon the ground a few paces away. In her eyes was a new expression of fear. She could not understand her father's terrible action. Never before had she witnessed a scene like this: death and such boundless fury. It could not be her father, Klitonda, the brave chief of the Ayana. And even as the giant looked upon his daughter his arm relaxed and a somewhat softer light came into his eyes. He crossed to where she was crouching and laid his hand upon her shoulder. She shrank away at the touch, gentle though it was, while a low moan escaped her lips. Presently she looked up. Her father had moved away, and was kneeling by the side of the prostrate woman, scanning her face and speaking to her.

"Klota, Klota," he called, "Klitonda has come. He is here."

Quickly Owindia rose to her feet and hurried to where her father was kneeling. So great had been her terror that she had scarcely thought of her mother. But now she realised that something was wrong. Seeing her mother huddled there, so still and death-like, with a gurgling cry she dropped by her side and peered into those staring eyes, and softly stroked the face so dear to her.

"Mother, mother!" she wailed, "speak to Owindia. Don't look that way. Don't!"

Then something arrested her attention, which made her heart almost stop its beating. It was the slow trickle of a tiny red stream, oozing out from the jet black hair of the unconscious woman, and mingling with the sand. "It's blood! It's blood!" she cried, lifting her startled eyes to her father's face. "The Chilcats have killed her! Oh-o-o-o!"

Klitonda was himself once more. No longer was his rage expressed in outward action. It was like the silent, pent-up force of the concealed mine, only waiting the right moment to burst forth in appalling destruction. Gathering his wife tenderly in his strong arms he carried her swiftly to the lodge, and laid her gently upon a bed of soft furs. Well did he know that she would never look at him again, never speak to him more. Picking up a dressed deer-skin lying near he drew it over Klota's stiffening body. He paused for a moment ere shrouding her face. A slight chain of gold encircled the woman's neck, supporting a small locket concealed beneath her dress. This he unfastened, and handed it to Owindia.

"Wear it, child," he said; "it was your mother's."

The long day waned, and night at length shut down chilly over the land. A fitful breeze rippled the river's surface, and stirred the tops of the pointed trees. It moaned around the lodge wherein lay Owindia upon her bed of skins of wild animals. Her black hair fell around her drawn, tear-stained face. The light from the fire outside illumined the interior of the humble abode. It threw into clear relief the graceful form of the sleeping maiden and the contour of her shrouded mother not far away.

By the burning logs crouched Klitonda. No sleep came to his eyes. He gazed down silently into the red hot embers, as if fascinated by their fiery glow. But hotter and more terrible was the fire surging within the breast of this outraged chief. Once he straightened himself up, turned partly around, and threw out a hard clenched fist toward the great Chilcoot range of mountains lying away to the westward. Such action was more eloquent than many words. It was a symbol, the outward and visible sign of a mighty inward resolve.

#### **CHAPTER II**

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#### **FOILED**

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Steep wooded banks lined both sides of the Yukon River for many miles. On one of the highest hills stood Klitonda, keenly watching the crooked stream as it wound like a silver thread through its setting of dark green trees. He might have been a stump, for not the slightest movement did he make.

Far away in the distance toward the left his eyes were resting upon two specks gliding steadily up stream. That they were Chilcat traders and plunderers he was well aware. As he looked his right hand closed fiercely upon the stout bow which only his arm could bend to its full capacity. The day was cool, and a keen wind careening over the land presaged a coming storm. But Klitonda heeded it not.

Since that terrible night, over a year before, when he had watched the burning embers in front of the lodge wherein his wife was lying cold in death, the fire raging within his heart had not subsided. Time had only added fuel, and a deeper intensity to the flames. The Chilcats had vowed revenge for the brave who had been slain. "Blood for blood" was their cry, and they had mercilessly hunted Klitonda from place to place. They had threatened to exterminate the whole Ayana tribe if the chief were not delivered into their hands. But this threat had never been carried out, for the Chilcats could not well afford to slaughter the hunters and

trappers who supplied them so regularly with an abundance of game and valuable furs.

But Klitonda had not been idle. He had roamed the land like a weird spectre, appearing suddenly in the most unlikely places, and at times when least expected. He had visited every band of his scattered flock by river, lake, and in forest depths. Wherever a camp fire had been lighted there Klitonda's voice had been heard, pleading with his people, and urging them to arouse to action and drive back the haughty, insulting Chilcats beyond the mountain ranges. But his efforts seemed all in vain. A spirit of base fear pervaded the hearts of even the lustiest of the warriors. They had been too terribly crushed and held in subjection so long to be stirred easily to action. The old men and women who had survived that slaughtering carnage had passed away, but not without instilling into the breasts of their children their own overwhelming dread of that cruel coast tribe.

With Klitonda it was different. Fear to him was unknown, and he despised the cringing spirit of his people. Two forces now governed his very being: one, the love he bore to his only child, Owindia; the other, the hatred to the Chilcats, and his determination to free the land from their dominating sway. So on this late fall afternoon as he watched the two canoes out upon the river an almost overpowering passion possessed his soul. This was due to the visit he had just made to his wife's grave near at hand. He had not previously returned to the place since he had borne her body up that steep hill over twelve months before. But the longing had been strong within his heart to look upon the spot where she was lying. And so he had come back, and

had stood for a long time by the lonely mound upon the hilltop.

Having watched the advancing canoes until the trees along the shore hid them from view, Klitonda left the summit and glided swiftly down through the forest toward the river. Ere long he moved more cautiously, and at length coming to the brow of the bank he dropped upon his knees, and crept warily forward. Under the shelter of a small thick fir tree he paused and from his place of concealment he was able to obtain an excellent view of all that took place below. He could see that the Chilcats had landed, and were bartering with a number of Ayana Indians encamped at that very place. Klitonda well knew that moose meat and skins were being exchanged for trinkets of little value. In fact the Chilcats set the price, and if they had nothing to give would always take what they wanted as a matter of course.

Klitonda breathed hard, and his dusky face grew darker than ever as he watched the unscrupulous barter. How he longed to leap down the hill and meet those plunderers face to face. He believed he would be a match for all of them, even though they were ten to one. But he well knew that such an act would be useless. Nothing would be gained. Only by the united efforts of the Ayana could anything of a definite nature be accomplished.

Presently an expression of anxiety came into Klitonda's eyes. For a while he remained lost in thought. His mind turned toward his daughter whom he had left that morning in a temporary lodge farther upstream. The Chilcats would pass that way, and he must get there first. It would not do for those human wolves to see Owindia.

Slipping quietly back from the brow of the hill until he had gained the safety of the forest, he sped with nimble feet among the trees. No trail marked the way, and Klitonda needed none. He was as certain of his steps as if he walked on a well-beaten road. Ere long the river appeared to view, and warily approaching the shore he looked carefully up and down the stream. Then drawing a small dug-out canoe from a concealed place he pushed it gently into the water and stepped in. Seizing one of the two paddles lying in the bottom he sent the rocking craft speeding on its way. The wind was in his teeth, blowing strong and keen from the great lake two miles beyond.

Klitonda had gone but a short distance, when, happening to look back, he saw the two canoes of the Chilcats rounding a bend in the river several hundred yards behind. They had evidently caught sight of the craft ahead, and were bending strongly to their paddles in an effort to overtake the lone voyager.

The sight of his pursuers affected Klitonda like magic. With a jerk he settled himself into a better position, and drove the blade of his polished paddle into the cold water with a sudden swish. The canoe responded like a thing of life, and bounded forward as if eager to do its master's bidding. Only occasionally did Klitonda glance back, and each time he noticed that the Chilcats were steadily gaining. There were ten of them, and each wielded a paddle.

The current was now swift and Klitonda was compelled at times to keep close to the shore. Eagerly he looked ahead and at length saw far beyond the faint outline of the lodge he had recently erected. The sight lent new strength to his arms. He must reach the place before his pursuers overtook him. Soon the rain, which had been threatening for some time, met him. It drove lashingly into his face, impelled by the ever increasing wind. But neither rain, wind nor current could stay the onward rush of that trim little craft. The paddle bent beneath Klitonda's tremendous sweep. He felt that the Chilcats were not far behind, but he could not afford to turn around even for one fleeting glance. His eyes were constantly fixed upon the lodge ahead, which was now becoming quite distinct. He watched for Owindia as he approached. Would she be near the shore, waiting his return, or had she strolled off into the forest a short distance as was sometimes her custom?

Nearer and nearer swept the canoe. He could see the opening of the lodge, but no one was in sight; all was in silence about the place. A few more mighty strokes, and then a wild, piercing whoop broke from his lips. It was answered by yells of derision from the pursuing Chilcats. They knew the man now as the outcast chief whom they longed to capture. He could not escape them they felt sure, and what could one man do, armed only with bow and arrows, against their fire-vomiting guns? They would take him alive, if possible, in triumph back to the coast. And his daughter—they saw her emerge from the lodge—would be theirs, too. There was not a Chilcat but had heard of her remarkable beauty, and longed to possess her as his own.

Owindia comprehended the whole situation at a glance. With her to think was to act, so hurrying forward she reached the shore just as Klitonda ran the canoe alongside. Words were unnecessary, and as Owindia stepped lightly

and quickly aboard, she seized the unused paddle, dropped upon her knees, and began to assist her father. They were now close to the large lake, and the swells rolling in through the narrow channel ahead gave evidence of the roughness of the water beyond. But not for an instant did Klitonda hesitate. Pointing the canoe for the opening it bounded forward as if anxious to do battle with the tempest outside. The white-capped waves rushed to meet it; the spray dashed over the bow at each headlong plunge, and the racing wind strove to turn it from its course.

Klitonda steered straight for the open. Owindia's lithe form bent and swayed at each dip of her paddle. No word was spoken, for father and daughter realised the seriousness of their position. Both knew what fearful odds they were facing. It seemed the wildest folly to attempt to run over that lake in such a frail craft. But better far to brave the fury of the elements than to fall into the hands of their pursuers. With the former there was the possible chance of mercy and escape; with the latter none.

Klitonda did not believe that the Chilcats would attempt the pursuit across the lake. Great was his surprise, therefore, when glancing back he saw that they were holding firmly to their course. So set were they upon making the capture that their inborn discretion was for the time overcome by the spirit of rashness. Where such a small canoe could go they could follow, so they fondly imagined. But they forgot how heavily their crafts were freighted, not only with the men, but also with the large supply of moose meat they had obtained down the river. At first the canoes were able to stem the waves which beat against their bows.

They rent them asunder and threw them easily aside. At length, however, the waves became larger and as the curling whitecaps reared up angrily in front, the canoes plunged heavily and began to ship water. Seeing this the Chilcats realised their imminent danger, and in a moment of panic swung the canoes to the left as if to make for the shore. It proved a fatal mistake, for the next oncoming wave broke right over them, completely swamping both canoes. In an instant the ten Chilcats were struggling desperately in the icy water. They were all good swimmers, and at once struck out for the land. But their efforts were in vain, and soon the last had disappeared beneath the surface of that rough inland lake.

When Klitonda saw what had happened, a grim triumph shone in his clear dark eyes. He spoke a few words to Owindia, who drawing in her paddle turned herself deftly about in the canoe. Klitonda did the same, and soon they were driving before the wind back over the very course they had just taken. Night had shut down dark and cold by the time they reached smoother water, and passed down the narrow channel. Soon they were before their own lodge, and the canoe drawn well up on the shore. Then a fire was lighted, and supper prepared.

Klitonda sat that evening by the fire, while Owindia lay on several skins just within the door of the lodge. The bright light fell upon her strongly moulded face, and played with her dark hair. Her eyes were gazing dreamily before her, out upon the leaping flames. Occasionally Klitonda looked in her direction and his eyes were full of tenderness. "I nearly lost you to-night, little one," he began. "Things looked very bad for a time."

"Oh, it was terrible!" and Owindia clasped her hands before her as she replied, while a slight shiver shook her body. "When will we be safe from the cruel Chilcats? Why do they hunt us all the time? Why can't they leave us alone?"

"They will never do that, child, until our people make up their minds to drive them back beyond the mountains of the setting sun, and I fear that will not be for some time. I am dreading the outcome of the death of those ten men tonight."

"In what way, father?"

"The Chilcats will think that the Ayana killed them, and they may come in great numbers to seek revenge. Anyway no matter what happens we are never safe. They hate me because I have always opposed them, and have been trying to stir up our people against them. And they want you because you are so beautiful. I understand there is great rivalry among the coast Indians over you. The chief's son, a very determined man, has made up his mind to have you as his wife. Oh, little one, my heart is sore all the time. I am ever thinking how those wolves are trying to steal you away. How could I live without you? Since your dear mother died you have been my only comfort."

"But why should the chief's son want me, father?" Owindia replied. "There must be many women along the coast more pleasing than I am."

"But you are different from them, child. You know that yourself. There is white blood in your veins, and your mother

taught you many things which the coast women do not know."

"Yes, father, my mother taught me much, and I have forgotten nothing. I think over everything day and night. I would die rather than be the wife of a Chilcat brave, even though he were the chief's son. There is something here, father," and she placed her hand upon her breast, "which gives me no peace. It is like a voice telling me of a life different from this such as we are living. My mother often told me about the wonderful things beyond the great mountains of the rising sun, where there are no cruel Chilcats; where people live in lodges so different from ours, and know, oh, so many things. And she told me something else, father."

"What is it, little one?"

"She said that there were no medicine men out there; that the white people believed in the Great Father who cares for each one. She told me many beautiful stories about Him, and I remember them all."

For a time Klitonda did not speak, but gazed thoughtfully into the fire. This noted hunter and dreaded warrior was now as quiet as a little child. Years before the tiny seed of a new power had entered his heart. It had been slowly growing, and was steadily contending with his wild savage nature.

"Your mother often told me about the wonderful ways of the white people," he after a while began. "She taught me many things, and I have always wanted our own race to understand the feeling that is in my heart. Why do we ever remain the same? We are no better than our fathers and forefathers. They hunted, fished, trapped and fought. We are doing the same. This land is ours, and has been ours for ages. Shall we let the Chilcats have it, or shall we drive them back, and learn the secret of the ways of the white people? I cannot tell all that's in my heart and mind, but I see and hear things, and when I try to tell them to my people they shake their heads, and think there is something wrong with me."

Klitonda rose slowly to his feet, and stood erect before the fire. His gaunt face was drawn and tense, and in his eyes dwelt a wistful, yearning expression.

"Little one," and he looked down earnestly upon his daughter as he spoke, "I have a strange feeling to-night. Something tells me that we are soon to break the influence of the Chilcats over this land. I see a new power coming to our aid, though I cannot tell what it is. My heart is much lighter than it has been for months. We must get away from here, for we are never safe so close to the coast. Sleep now, Owindia, for we must leave very early in the morning."

#### **CHAPTER III**

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## **OUT OF THE STORM**

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There was snow everywhere. The air was full of it. It had been falling for hours. The wind raced howling over the land, tossing the tree tops in swirling confusion. Klitonda was late, and the soft snow impeded his progress. The small sled he was drawing was well loaded with game he had taken from his traps. He had not expected such a storm when he started from his lodge early that morning. There was not a cloud to be seen then, and the sun was bright above the horizon. But the sky had suddenly darkened, and the tempest had burst upon him when he was miles from home. He had crossed lakes and wild meadows where he could hardly see two rods ahead of him. But he knew his course, and kept steadily on.

He was in the shelter of the forest now where the wind could not worry him, and a little farther on stood his snug winter abode. He was thinking deeply as he plodded forward, though at times he cast furtive glances among the trees as if expecting someone to emerge from their secret depths. He had met a trapper of his own tribe that morning who had imparted to him disquieting news. The Chilcats, so he was told, were preparing to cross the mountains when the winter was over. They were to come in great numbers to demand compensation for the ten traders who had lost their lives the preceding fall. They believed that they had been

slain by the Ayana Indians, and would listen to no word of explanation. Besides heavy payments of valuable furs, it was rumoured that they were to demand the persons of Klitonda and his daughter. If their requests were not granted they would wage a merciless war, wipe the Ayana people out of existence, and do all the hunting and trapping themselves. Already there were Chilcat runners in the country who were spying out the various bands, and seeking to ascertain where the chief and his daughter were passing the winter. Such stories were in circulation throughout the country, losing nothing in their transmission from band to band.

Although Klitonda was well aware how prone his people were to exaggerate such tales, and at times to make out matters really worse than they were, he felt, nevertheless, there must be some truth at the bottom of such reports. He had fully expected that the Chilcats would bestir themselves over the death of the ten braves, and had often wondered what course of action they would take to obtain satisfaction.

He was thinking seriously over what he had heard as he pressed steadily forward through the storm on this late mid-winter afternoon. His alert attitude, and the restless roving of his eyes among the trees plainly showed that the stories were not without their effect. He longed to catch sight of the runners now. There would be no more prowling around his lodge.

At length he came to a sudden standstill, and gazed down intently upon the snow. There before him were snowshoe tracks recently made. From the impressions left Klitonda knew that it was not one of his own tribe who had passed that way. It must have been a stranger, and who else would be prowling around in such a storm but one of the Chilcat spies?

Dropping the cord of his sled the chief unslung the bow from off his back, drew forth a sharp pointed arrow from the moose-hide guiver, and looked keenly ahead. Then he started cautiously forward upon the trail of the unknown traveller. As he advanced he noted that the marks in the snow became more crooked, and it seemed as if the person who made them was staggering heavily. In one place he saw where he had evidently fallen, and only after a struggle had regained his feet. Henceforth the tracks were more zig-zag than ever. Wondering as to the meaning of it all Klitonda now stepped on more rapidly, and soon through the storm he caught a glimpse of a reeling figure some distance beyond. That he was a Chilcat he had not the slightest doubt, and his one desire was to approach quietly and dispatch him as quickly as possible. No feeling of pity stirred Klitonda's heart at the sight of the unfortunate man lost in such a storm. He was a spy, his merciless enemy who had come to seek him out.

The staggering man never once looked back. His head was bent forward, and he seemed to be groping his way as if in the darkest night. Klitonda had the arrow fitted to the string, and was about to draw it full to the head when the stranger, with a pitiful cry of despair, threw up his hands, and fell full length upon his face in the soft yielding snow. Seeing that he did not move, or make any attempt to rise, Klitonda stepped warily toward him, still keeping the bow and arrow in readiness for any sudden emergency. When a