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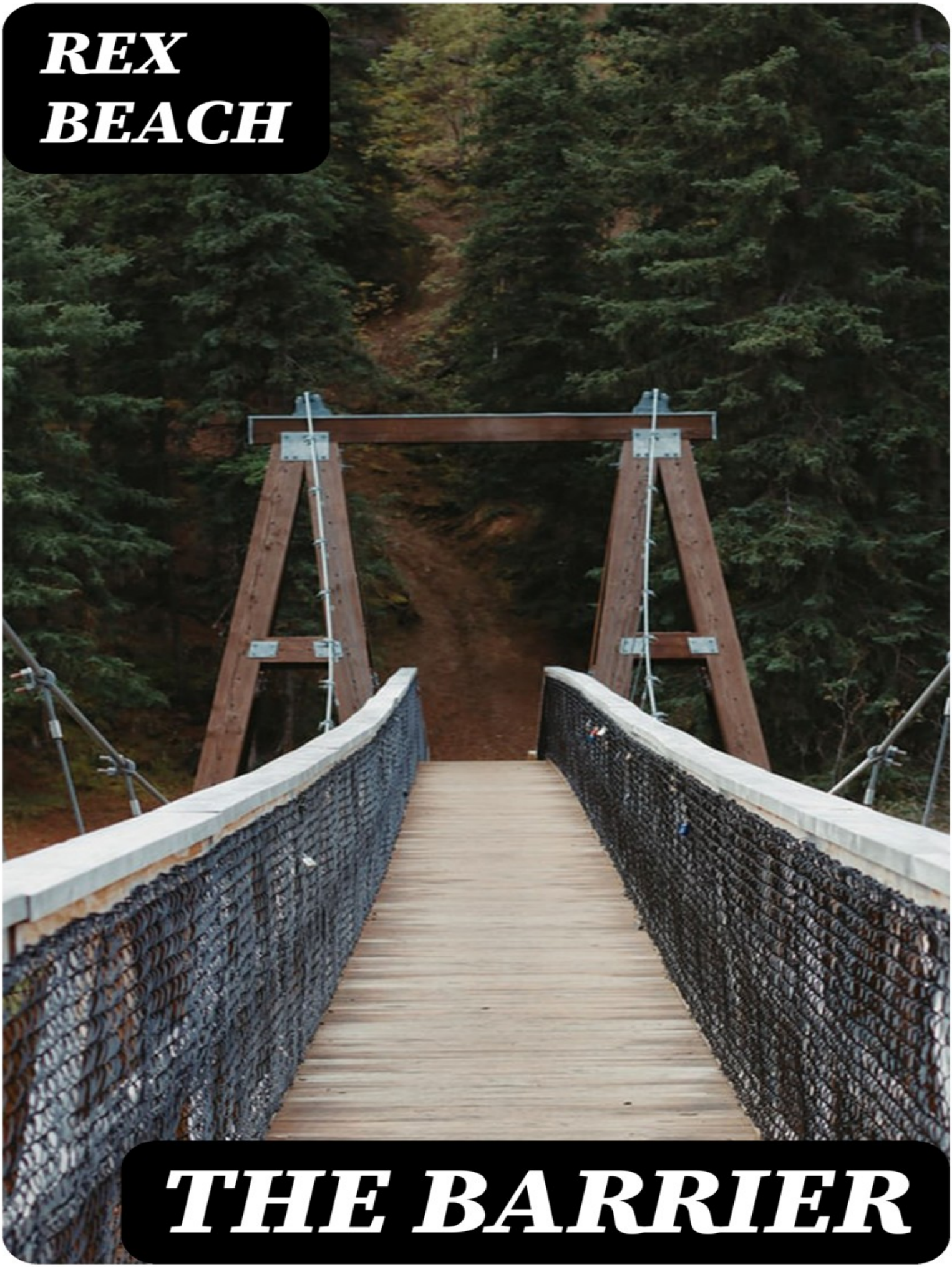

THE BARRIER

Rex Beach

The Barrier

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CHAPTER I

THE LAST FRONTIER

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Many men were in debt to the trader at Flambeau, and many counted him as a friend. The latter never reasoned why, except that he had done them favors, and in the North that counts for much. Perhaps they built likewise upon the fact that he was ever the same to all, and that, in days of plenty or in times of famine, his store was open to every man, and all received the same measure. Nor did he raise his prices when the boats were late. They recalled one bleak and blustery autumn when the steamer sank at the Lower Ramparts, taking with her all their winter's food, how he eked out his scanty stock, dealing to each and every one his portion, month by month. They remembered well the bitter winter that followed, when the spectre of famine haunted their cabins, and when for endless periods they cinched their belts, and cursed and went hungry to sleep, accepting, day by day, the rations doled out to them by the grim, gray man at the log store. Some of them had money-belts weighted low with gold washed from the bars at Forty Mile, and there were others who had wandered in from the Koyukuk with the first frosts, foot-sore and dragging, the legs of their skin boots eaten to the ankle, and the taste of dog meat still in their mouths. Broken and dispirited, these had fared as well through that desperate winter as their brothers from up-river, and received pound for pound of musty flour, strip for strip of rusty bacon, lump for lump of

precious sugar. Moreover, the price of no single thing had risen throughout the famine.

Some of them, to this day, owed bills at Old Man Gale's, of which they dared not think; but every fall and every spring they came again and told of their disappointment, and every time they fared back into the hills bearing another outfit, for which he rendered no account, not even when the debts grew year by year, not even to "No Creek" Lee, the most unlucky of them all, who said that a curse lay on him so that when a pay-streak heard him coming it got up and moved away and hid itself.

There were some who had purposely shirked a reckoning, in years past, but these were few, and their finish had been of a nature to discourage a similar practice on the part of others, and of a nature, moreover, to lead good men to care for the trader and for his methods. He mixed in no man's business, he took and paid his dues unfalteringly. He spoke in a level voice, and he smiled but rarely. He gazed at a stranger once and weighed him carefully, thereafter his eyes sought the distances again, as if in search of some visitor whom he knew or hoped or feared would come. Therefore, men judged he had lived as strong men live, and were glad to call him friend.

This day he stood in the door of his post staring up the sun-lit river, absorbing the warmth of the Arctic afternoon. The Yukon swept down around the great bend beneath the high, cut banks and past the little town, disappearing behind the wooded point below, which masked the up-coming steamers till one heard the sighing labor of their stacks before he saw their smoke. It was a muddy, rushing

giant, bearing a burden of sand and silt, so that one might hear it hiss and grind by stooping at its edge to listen; but the slanting sun this afternoon made it appear like a boiling flood of molten gold which issued silently out of a land of mystery and vanished into a valley of forgetfulness. At least so the trader fancied, and found himself wishing that it might carry away on its bosom the heavy trouble which weighed him down, and bring in its place forgetfulness of all that had gone before. Instead, however, it seemed to hurry with news of those strange doings "up-river," news that every down-coming steamboat verified. For years he had known that some day this thing would happen, that some day this isolation would be broken, that some day great hordes of men would overrun this unknown land, bringing with them that which he feared to meet, that which had made him what he was. And now that the time had come, he was unprepared.

The sound of shouting caused him to turn his head. Down-stream, a thousand yards away, men were raising a flag-staff made from the trunk of a slender fir, from which the bark had been stripped, heaving on their tackle as they sang in unison. They stood well out upon the river's bank before a group of well-made houses, the peeled timbers of which shone yellow in the sun. He noted the symmetrical arrangement of the buildings, noted the space about them that had been smoothed for a drill-ground, and from which the stumps had been removed; noted that the men wore suits of blue; and noted, in particular, the figure of an officer commanding them.

The lines about the trader's mouth deepened, and his heavy brows contracted.

"That means the law," he murmured, half aloud, while in his voice was no trace of pleasure, nor of that interest which good men are wont to show at sight of the flag. "The last frontier is gone. The trail ends here!"

He stood so, meditating sombrely, till the fragment of a song hummed lightly by a girl fell pleasantly on his ears, whereupon the shadows vanished from his face, and he turned expectantly, the edges of his teeth showing beneath his mustache, the corners of his eyes wrinkling with pleasure.

The sight was good to him, for the girl approaching down the trail was like some wood sprite, light-footed, slender, and dark, with twin braids of hair to her waist framing an oval face colored by the wind and sun. She was very beautiful, and a great fever surged up through the old man's veins, till he gripped the boards at his side and bit sharply at the pipe between his teeth.

"The salmon-berries are ripe," she announced, "and the hills back of the village are pink with them. I took Constantine's squaw with me, and we picked quarts and quarts. I ate them all!"

Her laughter was like the tinkle of silver bells. Her head, thrown back as she laughed gayly, displayed a throat rounded and full and smooth, and tanned to the hue of her wind-beaten cheeks. Every move of her graceful body was unrestrained and flowing, with a hint of Indian freedom about it. Beaded and trimmed like a native princess, her garments manifested an ornature that spoke of savagery,

yet they were neatly cut and held to the pattern of the whites.

"Constantine was drunk again last night, and I had to give him a talking to when we came back. Oh, but I laid him out! He's frightened to death of me when I'm angry."

She furrowed her brow in a scowl—the daintiest, most ridiculous pucker of a brow that ever man saw—and drew her red lips into an angry pout as she recounted her temperance talk till the trader broke in, his voice very soft, his gray-blue eyes as tender as those of a woman:

"It's good to have you home again, Necia. The old sun don't shine as bright when you're away, and when it rains it seems like the moss and the grass and the little trees was crying for you. I reckon everything weeps when you're gone, girl, everything except your old dad, and sometimes he feels like he'd have to bust out and join the rest of them."

He seated himself upon the worn spruce-log steps, and the girl settled beside him and snuggled against his knee.

"I missed you dreadfully, daddy," she said. "It seemed as if those days at the Mission would never end. Father Barnum and the others were very kind, and I studied hard, but there wasn't any fun in things without you."

"I reckon you know as much as a priest, now, don't you?"

"Oh, lots more," she said, gravely. "You see, I am a woman."

He nodded reflectively. "So you are! I keep forgetting that."

Their faces were set towards the west, where the low sun hung over a ragged range of hills topped with everlasting white. The great valley, dark with an untrodden wilderness

of birch and spruce and alder, lay on this side, sombre and changeless, like a great, dark-green mat too large for its resting-place, its edges turned up towards the line of unmelting snow. Beyond were other ranges thrust skyward in a magnificent confusion, while still to the farther side lay the purple valley of the Koyukuk, a valley that called insistently to restless men, welcoming them in the spring, and sending them back in the late summer tired and haggard with the hunger of the North. Each year a tithe remained behind, the toll of the trackless places, but the rest went back again and again, and took new brothers with them.

"Did you like the books I sent you with Poleon when he went down to the coast? I borrowed them from Shakespeare George."

The girl laughed. "Of course I did—that is, all but one of them."

"Which one?"

"I think it was called The Age of Reason, or something like that. I didn't get a good look at it, for Father Barnum shrieked when he saw it, then snatched it as if it were afire. He carried it down to the river with the tongs."

"H'm! Now that I think of it," said the old man, "Shakespeare grinned when he gave it to me. You see, Poleon ain't much better on the read than I am, so we never noticed what kind of a book it was."

"When will Poleon get back, do you suppose?"

"Most any day now, unless the Dawson dance-halls are too much for him. It won't take him long to sell our skins if what I hear is true."

"What is that?"

"About these Cheechakos. They say there are thousands of tenderfeet up there, and more coming in every day."

"Oh! If I had only been here in time to go with him!" breathed the girl. "I never saw a city. It must be just like Seattle, or New York."

Gale shook his head. "No. There's considerable difference. Some time I'll take you out to the States, and let you see the world—maybe." He uttered the last word in an undertone, as if in self-debate, but the girl was too excited to notice.

"You will take mother, too, and the kiddies, won't you?"

"Of course!"

"Oh! I—I—" The attempt to express what this prospect meant to her was beyond her girlish rapture, but her parted lips and shining eyes told the story to Gale. "And Poleon must go, too. We can't go anywhere without him." The old man smiled down upon her in reassurance. "I wonder what he'll say when he finds the soldiers have come. I wonder if he'll like it."

Gale turned his eyes down-stream to the barracks, and noted that the long flag-staff had at last been erected. Even as he looked he saw a bundle mounting towards its tip, and then beheld the Stars and Stripes flutter out in the air, while the men below cheered noisily. It was some time before he answered.

"Poleon Doret is like the rest of us men up here in the North. We have taken care of ourselves so far, and I guess we're able to keep it up without the help of a smooth-faced Yankee kid for guardian."

"Lieutenant Burrell isn't a Yankee," said Necia. "He is a blue-grass man. He comes from Kentucky."

Her father grunted contemptuously. "I might have known it. Those rebels are a cultus, lazy lot. A regular male man with any ginger in him would shed his coat and go to work, instead of wearing his clothes buttoned up all day. It don't take much 'savvy' to run a handful of thirteen-dollar-a-month soldiers." Necia stirred a bit restlessly, and the trader continued: "It ain't man's work, it's—loafing. If he tries to boss us he'll get QUITE a surprise."

"He won't try to boss you. He has been sent here to build a military post, and to protect the miners in their own self-government. He won't take any part in their affairs as long as they are conducted peaceably."

Being at a loss for an answer to this unexpected defence, the old man grunted again, with added contempt, while his daughter continued:

"This rush to the upper country has brought in all sorts of people, good, bad—and worse; and the soldiers have been sent to prevent trouble, and to hold things steady till the law can be established. The Canadian Mounted Police are sending all their worst characters down-river, and our soldiers have been scattered among the American camps for our protection. I think it's fine."

"Where did you learn all this?"

"Lieutenant Burrell told me," she replied; at which her father regarded her keenly. She could not see the curious look in his eyes, nor did she turn when, a moment later, he resumed, in an altered tone:

"I reckon Poleon will bring you something pretty from Dawson, eh?"

"He has never failed to bring me presents, no matter where he came from. Dear old Poleon!" She smiled tenderly. "Do you remember that first day when he drifted, singing, into sight around the bend up yonder? He had paddled his birch-bark from the Chandelar without a thing to eat; hunger and hardship only made him the happier, and the closer he drew his belt the louder he sang."

"He was bound for his 'New Country'!"

"Yes. He didn't know where it lay, but the fret for travel was on him, and so he drifted and sang, as he had drifted and sung from the foot of Lake Le Barge."

"That was four years ago," mused Gale, "and he never found his 'New Country,' did he?"

"No. We tied him down and choked it out of him," Necia laughed. "Dear, funny old Poleon—he loves me like a brother."

The man opened his lips, then closed them, as if on second thought, and rose to his feet, for, coming towards them up the trail from the barracks, he beheld a trim, blue-coated figure. He peered at the approaching officer a moment, set his jaw more firmly, and disappeared into the store.

"Well, we have raised our flag-staff," said the Lieutenant as he took a seat below Necia. "It's like getting settled to keep house."

"Are you lazy?" inquired the girl.

"I dare say I am," he admitted. "I've never had time to find out. Why?"

"Are you going to boss our people around?" she continued, bent on her own investigation.

"No. Not as long as they behave. In fact, I hardly know what I am to do. Maybe you can tell me." His smile was peculiarly frank and winning. "You see, it's my first command, and my instructions, although comprehensive, are rather vague. I am supposed to see that mining rights are observed, to take any criminals who kindly offer themselves up to be arrested, and to sort of handle things that are too tough for the miners themselves."

"Why, you are a policeman!" said Necia, at which he made a wry face.

"The Department, in its wisdom, would have me, a tenderfoot, adjust those things that are too knotty for these men who have spent their lives along the frontier."

"I don't believe you will be very popular with our people," Necia announced, meditatively.

"No. I can see that already. I wasn't met with any brass-bands, and I haven't received any engraved silver from the admiring citizens of Flambeau. That leaves nothing but the women to like me, and, as you are the only one in camp, you will have to like me very much to make up for its shortcomings."

She approved of his unusual drawl; it gave him a kind of deliberation which every move of his long, lithe body belied and every glance of his eyes contradicted. Moreover, she liked his youth, so clean and fresh and strange in this land where old men are many and the young ones old with hardship and grave with the silence of the hills. Her life had been spent entirely among men who were her seniors, and,

although she had ruled them like a spoiled queen, she knew as little of their sex as they did of hers. Unconsciously the strong young life within her had clamored for companionship, and it was this that had drawn her to Poleon Doret—who would ever remain a boy—and it was this that drew her to the young Kentuckian; this, and something else in him, that the others lacked.

"Now that I think it over," he continued, "I'd rather have you like me than have the men do so."

"Of course," she nodded. "They do anything I want them to—all but father, and—"

"It isn't that," he interrupted, quickly. "It is because you ARE the only woman of the place, because you are such a surprise. To think that in the heart of this desolation I should find a girl like—like you, like the girls I know at home."

"Am I like other girls?" she inquired, eagerly. "I have often wondered."

"You are, and you are not. You are surprisingly conventional for these surroundings, and yet unconventionally surprising—for any place. Who are you? Where did you come from? How did you get here?"

"I am just what you see. I came from the States, and I was carried. That is all I can remember."

"Then you haven't lived here always?"

"Oh, dear, no! We came here while I was very little, but of late I have been away at school."

"Some seminary, eh?"

At this she laughed aloud. "Hardly that, either. I've been at the Mission. Father Barnum has been teaching me for five years. I came up-river a day ahead of you."

She asked no questions of him in return, for she had already learned all there was to know the day before from a grizzled corporal in whom was the hunger to talk. She had learned of a family of Burrells whose name was known throughout the South, and that Meade Burrell came from the Frankfort branch, the branch that had raised the soldiers. His father had fought with Lee, and an uncle was now in the service at Washington. On the mother's side the strain was equally militant, but the Meades had sought the sea. The old soldier had told her much more, of which she understood little; told her of the young man's sister, who had come all the way from Kentucky to see her brother off when he sailed from San Francisco; told her of the Lieutenant's many friends in Washington, and of his family name and honor. Meade Burrell was undoubtedly a fine young fellow in his corporal's eyes, and destined to reach great heights, as the other Burrells had before him. The old soldier, furthermore, had looked at her keenly and added that the Burrells were known as "divils among the weemen."

Resting thus on the steps of Old Man Gale's store, the two talked on till they were disturbed by the sound of shrill voices approaching, at which the man looked up. Coming down the trail from the town was a squaw and two children. At sight of Necia the little ones shouted gleefully and scampered forward, climbing over her like half-grown puppies. They were boy and girl, both brown as Siwashes, with eyes like jet beads and hair that was straight and coarse and black. At a glance Burrell knew them for "breeds," and evidently the darker half was closer to the surface now, for they choked, gurgled, stuttered, and

coughed in their Indian tongue, while Necia answered them likewise. At a word from her they turned and saw him, then, abashed at the strange splendor of his uniform, fell silent, pressing close to her. The squaw, also, seemed to resent his presence, for, after a lowering glance, she drew the shawl closer about her head, and, leaving the trail, slunk out of sight around the corner of the store.

Burrell looked up at his companion's clear-cut, delicate face, at the wind-tanned cheeks, against which her long braids lay like the blue-black locks of an Egyptian maid, then at her warm, dark eyes, in which was a hint of the golden light of the afternoon sun. He noted covertly the slender lines of her body and the dainty, firm, brown hands flung protectingly about the shoulders of her little friends, who were peering at him owlishly from their shelter.

The bitter revolt that had burned in him at the prospect of a long exile in this undiscovered spot died out suddenly. What a picture she made! How fresh and flower-like she looked, and yet the wisdom of her! He spoke impulsively:

"I am glad you are here, Miss Necia. I was glad the moment I saw you, and I have been growing gladder ever since, for I never imagined there would be anybody in this place but men and squaws—men who hate the law and squaws who slink about—like that." He nodded in the direction of the Indian woman's disappearance. "Either that, or, at best, a few 'breeds' like these little fellows."

She looked at him quickly.

"Well! What difference would that make?"

"Ugh! Squaws and half-breeds!" His tone conveyed in full his utter contempt.

The tiny hands of the boy and girl slid into her own as she arose. A curiously startled look lay in her eyes, and an inquiring, plaintive wrinkle came between her brows.

"I don't believe you understand," she said. "Lieutenant Burrell, this is my sister, Molly Gale, and this is my little brother John." Both round-eyed elfs made a ducking courtesy and blinked at the soldier, who gained his feet awkwardly, a flush rising into his cheeks.

From the regions at the rear of the store came the voice of an Indian woman calling:

"Necia! Necia!"

"Coming in a moment!" the girl called back; then, turning to the young officer, she added, quietly: "Mother needs me now. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER II

POLEON DORET'S HAND IS QUICKER THAN HIS TONGUE

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The trader's house sat back of the post, farther up on the hill. It was a large, sleepy house, sprawling against the sunny side of the slope, as if it had sought the southern exposure for warmth, and had dozed off one sultry afternoon and never waked up from its slumber. It was of great, square-hewn timbers, built in the Russian style, the under side of each log hollowed to fit snugly over its fellow underneath, upon which dried moss had previously been spread, till in effect the foot-thick walls were tongued and grooved and, through years of seasoning, become so tinder dry that no frosts or heats could penetrate them. Many architects had worked on it as it grew, room by room, through the years, and every man had left behind the mark of his individuality, from Pretty Charlie the pilot, who swung an axe better than any Indian on the river, to Larsen the ship's carpenter, who worked with an adze and who starved the summer following on the Koyukuk. It had stretched a bit year by year, for the trader's family had been big in the early days when hunters and miners of both breeds came in to trade, to loaf, and to swap stories with him. Through the winter days, when the caribou were in the North and the moose were scarce, whole families of natives came and camped there, for Alluna, his squaw, drew to her own blood,

and they felt it their due to eat of the bounty of him who ruled them like an overlord; but when the first goose honked they slipped away until, by the time the salmon showed, the house was empty again and silent, save for Alluna and the youngsters. In return these people brought him many skins and much fresh meat, for which he paid no price, and, with the fall, his cache was filled with fish of which the bulk were dried king salmon as long as a grown man's leg and worth a dollar apiece to any traveller.

There are men whose wits are quick as light, and whose muscles have been so tempered and hardened by years of exercise that they are like those of a wild animal. Of such was John Gale; but with all his intelligence he was very slow at reading, hence he chose to spend his evenings with his pipe and his thoughts, rather than with a book, as lonesome men are supposed to do. He did with little sleep, and many nights he sat alone till Alluna and Necia would be awakened by his heavy step as he went to his bed. That he was a man who could really think, and that his thoughts were engrossing, no one doubted who saw him sitting enthralled at such a time, for he neither rocked, nor talked, nor moved a muscle hour after hour, and only his eyes were alive. To-night the spell was on him again, and he sat bulked up in his chair, rocklike and immovable.

From the open door of the next room he could hear Necia and the little ones. She had made them ready for bed, and was telling them the tale of the snow-bird's spot.

"So when all the other birds had failed," he heard her say, "the little snowbird asked for a chance to try. He flew and flew, and just before he came to the edge of the world

where the two Old Women lived he pulled out all of his feathers. When he came to them he said:"

"'I am very cold. May I warm myself at your fire?'"

"They saw how little and naked he was, and how he shivered, so they did not throw sticks at him, but allowed him to creep close. He watched his chance, and when they were not looking he picked up a red-hot coal in his beak and flew back home with it as fast as ever he could—and that is how fire came to the Indian people."

"Of course the coal was hot, and it burned his throat till a drop of blood came through, so ever since that day the snowbird has had a red spot on his throat."

The two children spoke out in their mother's tongue, clamoring for the story of the Good Beaver who saved the hunter's life, and she began, this time in the language of the Yukon people, while Gale listened to the low music of her voice, muffled and broken by the log partition.

His squaw came in, her arrival unannounced except by the scuff of her moccasins, and seated herself against the wall. She did not use a chair, of which there were several, but crouched upon a bear-skin, her knees beneath her chin, her toes a trifle drawn together. She sat thus for a long time, while Necia continued her stories and put the little ones to bed. Soon the girl came to say good-night.

John Gale had never kissed his daughter, and, as it was not a custom of her mother's race, she never missed the caresses. On rare occasions the old man romped with the little ones and took them in his arms and acted as other fathers act, but he had never done these things with her. When she had gone he spoke without moving.

"She'll never marry Poleon Doret."

"Why?" inquired Alluna.

"He ain't her kind."

"Poleon is a good man."

"None better. But she'll marry some—some white man."

"Poleon is white," the squaw declared.

"He is and he ain't. I mean she'll marry an 'outside' man. He ain't good enough, and—well, he ain't her kind." Alluna's grunt of indignation was a sufficient answer to this, but he resumed, jerking his head in the direction of the barracks. "She's been talking a lot with this—this soldier."

"Him good man, too, I guess," said the wife.

"The hell he is!" cried the trader, fiercely. "He don't mean any good to her."

"Him got a woman, eh?" said the other.

"No, no! I reckon he's single all right, but you don't understand. He's different from us people. He's—he's—" Gale paused, at a loss for words to convey his meaning. "Well, he ain't the kind that would marry a half-breed."

Alluna pondered this cryptic remark unsuccessfully, and was still seeking its solution when her lord continued:

"If she really got to loving him it would be bad for all of us."

Evidently Alluna read some hidden meaning back of these words, for she spoke quickly, but in her own tongue now, as she was accustomed to do when excited or alarmed.

"Then this thing must cease at once. The risk is too great. Better that you kill him before it is too late."'

"Hardly that," said the trader.

"Think of the little ones and of me," the squaw insisted, and, encouraged by his silence, continued: "Why not? Soon the nights will grow dark. The river runs swiftly, and it never gives up its dead. I can do it if you dare not. No one would suspect me."

Gale rose and laid his big hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Don't talk like that. There has been too much blood let already. We'll allow things to run along a bit as they are. There's time enough to worry."

He rose, but instead of going to his room he strode out of the house and walked northward up the trail, passing through the town and out of sight. Alluna sat huddled up in the doorway, her shawl drawn close about her head, and waited for him until the late sun—which at this time of year revolves in a great circle overhead—dipped down below the distant mountains for the midnight hour, then rolled slanting out again a few points farther north, to begin its long journey anew; but he did not return. At last she crept stiffly in-doors, like an old and weary woman, the look of fright still staring in her eyes.

About nine o'clock the next morning a faint and long-drawn cry came from the farthest limits of the little camp. An instant later it was echoed closer, and then a dog began to howl. Before its voice had died away another took it up sadly, and within three breaths, from tip and down the half-mile of scanty water-front, came the cry of "Steam-bo-o-a-t!" Cabin doors opened and men came out, glanced up the stream and echoed the call, while from sleepy nooks and sun-warmed roofs wolf-dogs arose, yawning and stretching. Those who had slept late dressed as they hurried towards

the landing-place, joining in the plaint, till men and malamutes united in the shrill, slow cry.

Down-stream came the faint-sighing whoof-whoof of a steamer, and then out from behind the bend she burst, running on the swift spring current with the speed of a deer. She blew hoarsely before the tardy ones had reached the bank, and when abreast of the town her bell clanged, the patter of her great wheel ceased, she reversed her engines and swung gracefully till her bow was up against the current, then ploughed back, inching in slowly until, with much shouting and the sound of many gongs, she slid her nose quietly into the bank beneath the trading-post and was made fast. Her cabin-deck was lined with passengers, most of whom were bound for the "outside," although still clad in mackinaw and overalls. They all gazed silently at the hundred men of Flambeau, who stared back at them till the gang-plank was placed, when they came ashore to stretch their legs. One of them, however, made sufficient noise to make up for the silence of the others. Before the steamer had grounded he appeared among the Siwash deck-hands, his head and shoulders towering above them, his white teeth gleaming from a face as dark as theirs, shouting to his friends ashore and pantomiming his delight to the two Gale children who had come with Alluna to welcome him.

"Who's dose beeg, tall people w'at stan' 'longside of you, Miz Gale?" he called to her; then, shading his eyes elaborately, he cried, in a great voice: "Wall! wal! I b'lieve dat's M'sieu Jean an' Mam'selle Mollee. Ba Gar! Dey get so beeg w'ile I'm gone I don' know dem no more!"

The youthful Gales wriggled at this delicious flattery and dug their tiny moccasined toes into the sand. Molly courtesied nervously and continuously as she clung to her mother, and the boy showed a gap where two front teeth had been and was now filled by a very pink tongue.

"Wen you goin' stop grow, anyhow, you two, eh?" continued the Frenchman, and then, in a tone of sadness: "If I t'ink you ack lak' dis, I don' buy all dese present. Dese t'ing ain' no good for ole folks. I guess I'll t'row dem away." He made as if to heave a bundle that he carried into the river, whereupon the children shrieked at him so shrilly that he laughed long and incontinently at the success of his sally.

Lieutenant Burrell had come with the others, for the arrival of a steamboat called for the presence of every soul in camp, and, spying Necia in the outskirts of the crowd, he took his place beside her. He felt constrained, after what had happened on the previous evening, but she seemed to have forgotten the episode, and greeted him with her usual frankness. Even had she remembered it, there was nothing he could say in explanation or in apology. He had lain awake for hours thinking of her, and had fallen asleep with her still in his mind, for the revelation of her blood had come as a shock to him, the full force of which he could not appreciate until he had given himself time to think of it calmly.

He had sprung from a race of Slave-holders, from a land where birth and breed are more than any other thing, where a drop of impure blood effects an ineradicable stain; therefore the thought of this girl's ignoble parentage was so repugnant to him that the more he pondered it the more pitiful it seemed, the more monstrous. Lying awake and

thinking of her in the stillness of his quarters, it had seemed a very unfortunate and a very terrible thing. During his morning duties the vision of her had been fresh before him again, and his constant contemplation of the matter had wrought a change in his attitude towards the girl, of which he was uncomfortably conscious and which he was glad to see she did not perceive.

"There are some of the lucky men from El Dorado Creek," she informed him, pointing out certain people on the deck. "They are going out to the States to get something to eat. They say that nothing like those mines have ever been heard of in the world. I wish father had gone up last year when the news came."

"Why didn't he?" asked the Lieutenant. "Surely he must have been among the first to learn of it."

"Yes. 'Stick' George sent him word a year ago last fall, when he made the first discovery, but for some reason father wouldn't go."

The men were pouring off the boat now, and through the crowd came the tall Frenchman, bearing in the hollow of each arm a child who clasped a bundle to its breast. His eyes grew brighter at sight of Necia, and he broke into a flood of patois; they fairly bombarded each other with quick questions and fragmentary answers till she remembered her companion, who had fallen back a pace and was studying the newcomer, whereupon she turned.

"Oh, I forgot my manners. Lieutenant Burrell, this is Napoleon Doret—our Poleon!" she added, with proud emphasis.

Doret checked his volubility and stared at the soldier, whom he appeared to see for the first time. The little brown people in his arms stared likewise, and it seemed to Burrell that a certain distrust was in each of the three pairs of eyes, only in those of the man there was no shyness. Instead, the Canadian looked him over gravely from head to heel, seeming to note each point of the unfamiliar attire; then he inquired, without removing his glance:

"Were'bouts you live, eh?"

"I live at the post yonder," said the Lieutenant.

"Wat biznesse you work at?"

"I am a soldier."

"Wat for you come 'ere? Dere's nobody fightin' roun' dis place."

"The Lieutenant has been stationed here, foolish," said Necia. "Come up to the store quick and tell me what it's like at Dawson." With a farewell nod to Burrell, she went off with Doret, whose speech was immediately released again.

In spite of the man's unfriendliness, Burrell watched him with admiration. There were no heels to his tufted fur boots, and yet he stood a good six feet two, as straight as a pine sapling, and it needed no second glance to tell of what metal he was made. His spirit showed in his whole body, in the set of his head, and, above all, in his dark, warm face, which glowed with eagerness when he talked, and that was ever—when he was not singing.

"I never see so many people since I lef Quebec," he was saying. "She's jus' lak' beeg city—mus' be t'ree, four t'ousan' people. Every day some more dey come, an' all

night dey dance an' sing an' drink w'iskee. Ba gosh, dat's fine place!"

"Are there lots of white women?" asked the girl.

"Yes, two, t'ree hondred. Mos' of dem is work in dance-halls. Dere's one fine gal I see, name' Marie Bourgette. I tell you 'bout her by-an'-by."

"Oh, Poleon, you're in love!" cried Necia.

"No, siree!" he denied. "Dere's none of dem gal look half so purty lak' you." He would have said more, but spying the trader at the entrance of the store, he went to him, straightway launching into the details of their commercial enterprise, which, happily, had been most successful. Before they could finish, the crowd from the boat began to drift in, some of them buying drinks at the bar and others making purchases of tobacco and so forth, but for the main part merely idling about curiously.

Among the merchandise of the Post there were for sale a scanty assortment of fire-arms, cheap shot-guns, and a Winchester or two, displayed in a rack behind the counter in a manner to attract the eye of such native hunters as might need them, and with the rest hung a pair of Colt's revolvers. One of the new arrivals, who had separated from the others at the front, now called to Gale:

"Are those Colts for sale? Mine was stolen the other day." Evidently he was accustomed to Yukon prices, for he showed no surprise at the figure the trader named, but took the guns and tested each of them, whereupon the old man knew that here was no "Cheechako," as tenderfeet are known in the North, although the man's garb had deceived him at first glance. The stranger balanced the weapons, one

in either hand, then he did the "double roll" neatly, following which he executed a move that Gale had not witnessed for many years. He extended one of the guns, butt foremost, as if surrendering it, the action being free and open, save for the fact that his forefinger was crooked and thrust through the trigger-guard; then, with the slightest jerk of the wrist, the gun spun about, the handle jumped into his palm, and instantly there was a click as his thumb flipped the hammer. It was the old "road-agent spin," which Gale as a boy had practised hours at a time; but that this man was in earnest he showed by glancing upward sharply when the trader laughed.

"This one hangs all right," he said; "give me a box of cartridges."

He emptied his gold-sack in payment for the gun and ammunition, then remarked: "That pretty nearly cleans me. If I had the price I'd take them both."

Gale wondered what need induced this fellow to spend his last few dollars on a fire-arm, but he said nothing until the man had loosened the bottom buttons of his vest and slipped the weapon inside the band of his trousers, concealing its handle beneath the edge of his waistcoat. Then he inquired:

"Bound for the outside?"

"No. I'm locating here."

The trader darted a quick glance at him. He did not like this man.

"There ain't much doing in this camp; it's a pretty poor place," he said, guardedly.

"I'll put in with you, from its looks," agreed the other. "It's got too many soldiers to be worth a damn." He snarled this bitterly, with a peculiar leering lift of his lip, as if his words tasted badly.

"Most of the boys are going up-river," said Gale.

"Well, those hills look as if they had gold in them," said the stranger, pointing vaguely. "I'm going to prospect."

Gale knew instinctively that the fellow was lying, for his hands were not those of a miner; but there was nothing to be said. His judgment was verified, however, when Poleon drew him aside later and said:

"You know dat feller?"

"No."

"He's bad man."

"How do you know?"

"She's leave Dawson damn queeck. Dose Mounted Police t'row 'im on de boat jus' before we lef." Then he told a story that he had heard. The man, it seemed, had left Skagway between two suns, upon the disruption of Soapy Smith's band of desperadoes, and had made for the interior, but had been intercepted at the Pass by two members of the Citizens' Committee who came upon him suddenly. Pretending to yield, he had executed some unexpected coup as he delivered his gun, for both men fell, shot through the body. No one knew just what it was he did, nor cared to question him overmuch. The next heard of him was at Lake Bennett, over the line, where the Mounted Police recognized him and sent him on. They marked him well, however, and passed him on from post to post as they had driven others whose records were known; but he had lost himself in the