

CLASSICS TO GO

THE TIMBER PIRATE



CHARLES CHRISTOPHER JENKINS

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Charles Christopher Jenkins

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PROLOGUE

NIGHT'S sable curtain was soon to fall on the short-lived drama of a Winter day in the Laurentians. The departing sub-arctic sun, in its last pale glory, sent up from the omnipresent whiteness myriads of glistening beams that stabbed the eyes like leaping darts of fire. Of sounds there was oppressive absence. Not even a vagrant breeze sighed in the tree-tops; but at irregular intervals the intense stillness was smitten by the lugubrious "Spon-n-n-n-g!" of some aged tree splitting open to the heart where freezing moisture expanded in its crevices. All life and warmth seemed utterly exterminated in the pre-twilight calm save for the distant Monarch of Day slowly receding from his stark white world of desolation.

Yet even in these desolate wastes Man moved and had his being; for on the trail that wound down from the heights to the northwest there was the ribbonlike tracing of a dog sled and beside it the oval imprints of snowshoes. At a small cleared area in the scrub timber, just above where the trail dipped into a mighty, spruce-bearded ravine, the sled marks and the snowshoe patterns ceased.

On this spot, by a camp fire in the snow, hunched an elderly white man wrapped to his throat in blankets, beard and eyebrows thickly frosted from the vapour of his breath. His face, the wasted face of one who had endured intense physical suffering, was bereft of tangible expression; his eyes fixed dully on the slow-leaping, soundless flames from which there ascended into the zero-freighted air a wispy,

hairlike strand of smoke. Roundabout him were scattered canvas packsacks, rolls of bright coloured woollen blankets, fire-blackened pots and pans, two light chopping axes and a short-barrelled repeating rifle. Nearby, on the trail, a spent and footsore string of sled dogs lay flattened in the snow. Noses stretched to the fire, eyes closed and limbs inert, they might be mistaken for dead and frozen things but for the occasional faint heave of their flanks as their trained lungs drew sparingly of the biting ozone.

Of a sudden the deathlike calm was shattered by the whining crack of a high-power rifle. Closer by there was a swish and flap of clumsy wings, and a dowdy, slate-coloured *wesse-ke-jak* circled the camp uttering dismal cries of “Meat—meat—meat!”

Every canine head came to life with a start. The figure in the blankets winced as though struck from behind by an unseen icy fist, doubling forward in a racking fit of coughing that reverberated through the solitudes in listless, unsympathetic echoes. The man desisted with a choking gasp, his frame shaking in a palsy. Weakly he slumped back against a nearby packsack, hands clutching at his heart.

“Laddie,” he called in a voice that was pitifully faint, “Laddie—oh, Laddie!”

His arms sagged and went limp by his sides, his breath coming and going in the swift, sibilant gasps of a life flickering out from exhaustion.

A wolf-dog in the sled pack pricked up his pointed ears, and, straining away from his fellows, sniffed weirdly in the direction of the stricken man. The treacherous huskie leaped savagely against his restraining harness, a low, ominous growl issuing from the ugly curve of his long, trembling jaws. A woolly black-and-tan of the faithful Collie

strain gave a snarl of warning; then, with bristles rising on his thick, powerful neck, leaped at the throat of the traitor. That was the signal for a general release of pentup canine irritation. In a trice the whole sled pack was engaged in a furious free-for-all of flying fur and white-flashing fangs.

“Lie down!”

The command came low, deep and vibrant with a faint click of teeth. In electric unison the pack flattened, cowering silent in their places—all but the loyal Collie, which turned with slow-wagging tail and crouching rump to express its fealty as the scrub of the trail parted and a tall youth of spare but powerful build strode into the camp with the carcass of a young buck deer on his shoulder.

The newcomer flung the deer and his rifle to the snow and rushed to the side of the dying man, applying a pocket flask to his lips while he raised him on an arm with the tenderness of a woman. But the elder one was sinking fast—was beyond human aid.

For a few moments he rallied. “Laddie—thank God—you came,” he murmured weakly. “It is the end—the end of the trail—for me. There is so much—so much left undone, Laddie—so much wrong—an erring old man should undo—but you—you, Alexander, my boy—you won’t forget—the mine—the gold mine—goes to—”

The young man bent close to catch the whispered name.

Suddenly the invalid straightened as though galvanised in a last brief lease of life, eyes fixed on some vision above and beyond his companion.

“Black Jack! Black Jack Carlstone!” He cried it as one who cries from the wells of the heart. “Black Jack, my one true

friend—you—you will see that the boy—you will see that he carries out my will—”

His torso sagged and his head dropped limply on his chest before he finished.

With reverent touch the young man closed the tired old eyes, while his own welled up and there was a suggestion of a stifled sob in his throat. Mutely for some moments he remained on one knee in the snow, stoically still, looking into the face of the dead man as though questioning the cruel vagaries of Fate.

But as quickly his expression changed. Presently, when he arose and strode over to the fire, a hard, uncanny light flickered over his face—a face whose intense pallor accentuated the blackness of his extraordinary eyes. Framed in the close-fitting muskrat cap, it was a face that bespoke undeveloped power, strikingly handsome in its mephistophelian mould and portending a sagacity beyond its years.

He stood with arms outstretched to the setting sun, for the moment transformed to a pagan chieftain, and from his lips there issued the single word, “Kee-am!” which in the Indian means: “Nothing matters!”

“The gold mine goes to—” Slowly he repeated the dead man’s injunction. The lids of his black eyes narrowed until they became slits of flame and the lines of his mouth set close-pressed and cruel.

But when he turned and addressed the corpse his features relaxed and his voice was gutturally soft and musical: “It shall be as you willed, my kindest friend—but, for the present, *the mine is lent to me.*”

The sun, now a great, boiling globe under a fanlike glaze of scarlet, eased down upon the bleak western ranges, bordering their purple-shrouded crests with a narrow edging of brightest gold; hesitated one brief second in fiery farewell, then plunged behind the ragged rim of the northern world. Night swept with swift stealth across the wilderness, transforming it to a realm of spectrelike shadows.

A solemn hush, like a requiem of Nature for the day that was dead, fell over the forests.

The lone figure by the camp fire bent forward strangely as though gripped by an inward paroxysm.

As he did so, the deeps of the woods vibrated with a long-drawn, unearthly cry that echoed and re-echoed its fearsome notes far in the hills. It had seemed to rise from nowhere, a howl neither human nor bestial, but a demoniac blending of both; half anguished wail, half mocking laughter.

No prowling timber wolf broke the succeeding silence with an answering call. Even the wolf-dog in the sled pack cowered deeper in his snowy bed in whimpering fear.

CHAPTER I

ACEY SMITH

I

LOUIS HAMMOND, picking his way in the rapidly-failing twilight, dodged a pot-hole in the pulp camp's "main street," looked up at the unexpected sound of a woman's voice, and, misplacing a foot, went sprawling into another. He arose bespattered and with ice-cold ooze seeping to his ankles over the tops of his city shoes.

The young man barely checked the exclamation more forceful than polite that rose to his tongue when a lithe, girlish form, close-wrapped to the throat in a light fall coat, stepped out to the road from the shadowy verandah of the building that had been pointed out to him as the office of the superintendent.

A big man in a reefer and high boots laced to the knees followed, but before he gained her side, the woman turned.

"No, I thank you," Hammond heard her decline in a bright voice. "It is only a step down to the dock."

The man bowed deferentially, lifted his narrow-brimmed stetson with a courtliness oddly at variance with his rough garb, followed her with his eyes for a moment, then wheeled and returned to the building.

On the Nannabijou Limits, in the farthest reaches of Lake Superior's wild North Shore, was about the last place on

earth Hammond expected to encounter a white woman, especially one whose voice and every movement betokened long association in refined environment. Her verve and grace were the more apparent to him as she came tripping sure-footedly down through the half-light toward the waterfront.

She passed him on the other side of the road, and just then the door of a camp to his right was flung open emitting a widening flood of yellow lamplight that threw them both in relief.

Hammond caught a fleeting glimpse of an oval little face, fascinating in its contour; of a daintily-moulded mouth and chin and fine, high-arched eyebrows traced as with the delicate brush of an artist. He looked into great darkened blue eyes that held startled recognition; saw her lips open in a suppressed gasp, then she hurried on as though fearful he might accost her.

The time, the place and the extremely odd circumstances under which he had last felt the magnetic sway of those eyes beneath the unforgettable brows recurred to him as, with wildly-beating pulse, he stood wiping the mud from his hands and clothes with his pocket-handkerchief.

After her figure merged into the gloom down by the dock he waited, despite the chill that was searching at his damp ankles. Soon he heard subdued voices and the preliminary cough of a marine engine being started. Followed the even *chug-chug* of the motor's exhaust and a moving finger of light from a small marine searchlight swept out and felt its way through the channel in the immense field of pulpwood booms that all but filled Nannabijou Bay. Out beyond, the boat headed due west.

Who was the girl, and by what odd coincidence did she reappear in this ungodly place? He wondered. But in the maze of other inexplicable circumstances that had surrounded him since the night of the twenty-third of September when he had accepted his present strange mission, he gave up trying to guess the answer. The damp, oppressive gloom of a Northern Ontario pulp camp after sundown is not contributive to romancing and Hammond had pressing business in hand.

He crossed the road and knocked at the door of the superintendent's office.

II

"Come in!"

The command came clear and loud with an odd vibrating quality in its not inhospitable note.

The room which Hammond entered, an office in the fore of the superintendent's living and sleeping quarters, presented a scene of orderly confusion. Its desks were littered with newspapers, magazines and typewritten flimsies, and on its wall shelves sprawled reference books, encyclopedias, dictionaries and thumb-worn volumes of the classics.

The place struck Hammond as not being unlike the work-rooms of free-lance writing men he had known. But the one occupant, a tall, magnificently set-up figure of a man, was obviously not of the type that put their dreams on paper, but live them.

He barely glanced up when Hammond entered.

The visitor, awaiting recognition, was struck by the conscious power and subtle craftiness that lurked in the pale, exotic features of the other. Stratagem, deep and

super-capable, might be read in the eyes, black as night, over which the lids compressed ever so faintly now in a dreamy, faraway gaze. Wide, coldly-moulded temples, under close-cropped, crisp black hair, surmounted a face not to be put out of memory once even casually visualised, and the whole bespoke a mind that, one sensed, worked a dual lightning shift, analysing and sifting its impressions ever in advance of action and word. The lower features narrowed symmetrically to the alert, square-set chin; spare beneath the rounded prominence of the cheek-bones, with a sensitive mouth that could compress thin-lipped with a flicker in its half-smile that was cruel as sin.

The superintendent arose and walked slowly over to a desk and tossed down the limp-covered encyclopedia volume he had been perusing, then he turned and studied Hammond queerly, quite as one might study an inanimate object while in the depths of a mental problem, only this man's eyes held a ghostly, diabolical light.

"Mr. Hammond, what do you know about aphasia?" was his startling first question.

"Not a great deal," replied Hammond seeking to retain an unsurprised outwardness. "Refers to loss of identity or something of that sort. That encyclopedia ought to—"

"That being so," cut in the other, seeming to return to actual surroundings, "will you please be seated and tell me what's on your mind. Smoke?"

Hammond lifted a cigarette from the other's case. "You are Mr. A. C. Smith, the superintendent?"

"Acey Smith will do out here."

"As you seem to already know, my name is Hammond. I came looking for a job."

"A job?" He swept Hammond's raiment with his scornful eyes. "What's so suddenly gone wrong with the world of white collars and derby hats?"

"I brought this letter of introduction from Hon. J. J. Slack, M.P."

"Well." Acey Smith grunted amusedly, tore open the envelope and merely glanced at the contents. He turned to Hammond with a trace of a sneer playing about his mouth. "Indicates I'm not to bother trying to find out what you're wanted for and to slap you on the pay-roll at a hundred a month and found."

Hammond stifled indignant surprise. "I suppose you have something I can do?"

"Do?" There was something like a hiss in Acey Smith's half-laugh. "Take in the scenery, I'd suggest. There's a devil of a lot of it going to waste hereabouts."

"There's a mistake somewhere, Mr. Smith. I didn't come out here to loaf, but to tackle a job and earn the money."

The other smiled in better-natured scorn. "Say, Hammond," he derided, "what are you trying to put over on a poor, benighted bush superintendent? You know as well as the scribe angel knows that Old Man J.J. isn't forking you out the North Star's good money for what you're *going to do*, but for what you've *done*."

Hammond, remembering a warning, became cautious. "Nevertheless," he persisted, "I would at least like to make a show of earning the money."

"That's better," approved Acey Smith. "Tell me what you did for a living before J.J. tucked you out here."

Again Hammond felt the need of being guarded before those black, soul-searching eyes. "Lawyer," he prevaricated.

"Full-fledged?"

"No, student."

"H'm, hard-boiled is the only kind I could use. Oh, well, if you find it hard to keep your mind occupied you might camouflage as an extra check with the pole-counting squad. But your principal business, young man, will be doing as you damned well please, except when you get explicit orders to do otherwise.

"By the way," in a more friendly tone, "how was J.J. looking when you last saw him?"

"Pretty fit, though he seemed worried."

"Politics is a hell of a game, isn't it?" pronounced Acey Smith. "But you had better be turning in; you look mussed up and tired. You bunk with the head cook in the little shack next door up. First thing in the morning slip over to the camp store and get a bush outfit. Those parlour duds of yours are high-sign invitations to the 'flu,' and we don't encourage funerals."

Hammond thanked him, said good-night and turned to leave the room. His hand was on the door-latch when Acey Smith seemed to glide through the air to his side. He felt his wrist seized in a grip of steel.

"Spy!"

It came a hissing accusation that sent Hammond's hot blood to his head. He flung the other free of him. "No, damn you," he answered fiercely, "and I'm not a timber wolf either!"

He could not have explained what inspired him to say that, but at the words, Acey Smith cowered back as one might from the clinging clout of a logging whip. Hammond did not know that a man's face could at one moment hold so much of evil as leaped at him from Smith's. His head jerked back and the eyes that darted fire at Hammond were no longer the eyes of a human being. The taut lips bared back from the even white teeth in a hateful snarl; then Acey Smith's hands went up to his face convulsively, the palms cupping his lower features.

He whirled on a heel like an Objibway in a war dance. Next instant when he faced Hammond he was laughing quietly. "We'll drop the play-acting," he said, "and I'll take you up and introduce you to your shack-mate, Sandy Macdougall, the cook."

"You are *sure* I am not a spy?"

"I am satisfied you are not what I feared for your own welfare you might have been. Let's go."

But the cook had turned in and was snoring raucously when they reached his quarters, a substantial log shack that stood directly opposite the huge dining-camp. Four bunks were built into the further wall of the one-room interior, each equipped with a mattress and any amount of dark-grey blankets. The place was dimly illuminated by a sullen fire that gave out fitful, subdued cracklings in the little sheet-iron heater banked for the night with green wood.

Acey Smith lighted a wall lamp. Only one of the bunks was occupied, so Acey Smith directed Hammond to the other lower, bade him good-night and left abruptly.

The young man did not immediately retire in spite of his fatigue. Instead, he sat down by the stove, lit his pipe and tried mentally to propound something tangible out of the hodge-podge of mystery that had surrounded him since the night of September the twenty-third when he had allowed himself to be pitch-forked into a commission without definite instructions as to how he was to act or whom he was to accept as friends or enemies. Surely the whole world had not gone mad since that hour; there must be a sane method in the whole thing somewhere, but try as he could, cudgel his imagination as he might, he could build up no theory that was at all satisfying.

Then, after he retired, came memory of the fearsome visage of Acey Smith when he had flung him off over there at the door of his office. That was no “play-acting” as Smith had tried to pass it off. For the moment the man had been in deadly earnest, Hammond was sure of that.

But a pair of great startled, blue eyes under fine, high-arched eyebrows, came to drive all other haunts of the night away. Those eyes seemed to speak at him out of the shadows, and the fear in them took him back again to the night of the twenty-third when Fate had literally seized him by the scruff of the neck, yanked him out of a commonplace groove in life and tossed him into a vortex of baffling intrigue and mystery.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE PACT ON A TRAIN

I

ON the night of September twenty-third, Louis Hammond had been train-bound from Saskatoon east.

The transcontinental on which he was travelling had long since passed the Saskatchewan and Manitoba boundaries and was thundering over the muskegs and through the rock-cuts in the great wilderness of the Ontario divide. While the porter was making up his berth, Hammond sought the smoker, but it happened that a garrulous traveller was there holding forth on how the league of nations should have disposed of things to bring about eternal peace, and the young man fled as he might have from the deadly presence of smallpox.

He passed on to the next coach, a compartment and parlour car. The little smoker there promised peace and quiet. In it there sat alone a spare grey little man with a cadaverous face, who looked up from the book in his lap and gazed interestedly at Hammond. The latter lit his pipe and taking a seat in the opposite corner beside the window peered into the moon-bathed night and out over the shadowy wastes to the ragged ranges, where fitful wisps of ground aurora seemed to race with the train like wild ghouls of the night startled from their eeries by this mad, man-made thing tearing through the solitudes.

“Wild country, isn’t it?”

The voice of the little grey man startled Hammond from his reverie. “It is, magnificently so,” he replied. “There is something in its very hostile majesty that fascinates me immensely.”

“Yes? Easterner, I suppose?”

“Not exactly.” Hammond laughed. The other’s geniality drew him out of his mood. “You see, I’ve been a westerner too, and right here I feel sort of neutral.”

The little grey man laughed with him, a low, sociable cackle. “Still,” he pursued, “I’d wager you’re not a travelling man.”

“No,” a bit wearily. “Newspaper man—ex-newspaper man, I hope.”

The announcement seemed to agitate the little man more than such a commonplace announcement should. He was silent a moment while he brought forth a silver card-case. He lifted a bit of pasteboard from it, scrutinised it through his glasses, hesitated as though about to replace it in the card-case, then quite deliberately passed it to Hammond, who took it in at a glance:—

EULAS DALY UNITED STATES CONSUL, RAM CITY, ONTARIO, CAN.
--

Hammond drew out one of his own cards from a vest-pocket and reciprocated. The other still seemed needlessly perturbed. He spoke up at last as though it had cost him some effort to select a tactful opening: “And so you’ve quit the fourth estate, Mr. Hammond?”

"I intend to; that is, if I can otherwise earn a decent livelihood. I've had five years of the living-ghost world and I want to get clear of its grind and live things for awhile."

"So—that is it? Quite natural too." Mr. Daly seemed to be feeling his way, syllable by syllable. "Do you know, it is almost providential that you should have come in here at this moment, Mr. Hammond."

"Yes?"

"It's this way—you see: I just a few moments ago left a party who is privately seeking the services of a man of your particular type—and he wants him right away."

"A newspaper publisher?" wryly.

"No—no, not a publisher. By George, I'll bring him here to meet you. What do you say?"

"Hold on," exclaimed Hammond detaining him. "What is the job and who is the man?"

"Your first question I cannot answer, because I do not definitely know myself," replied the American consul. "But you have just hinted to me that you would like to play a part in big things, and if there's one man on the continent who holds that opportunity for you in the hollow of his hand it is Norman T. Gildersleeve."

The little grey man stood in the green-curtained entrance of the smoker, an expectant twinkle in his grey eyes. "What do you say?" he reiterated.

"Go ahead," agreed Hammond. "There can be no harm in meeting him anyway."

After Eulas Daly had gone, Hammond kept turning the name over and over in his mind: Gildersleeve—Norman T.

Gildersleeve? Where had he read or heard that name before? Somehow it seemed connected with big business and stock market reports. Ten to one he was looking for a private secretary, a biographer or a publicity agent. Well, any one of those things wouldn't be so bad, and it would be a change from the exacting grind of the daily newspaper where one was always behind the scenes of big things in process, but never, never quite a part of them. Hammond was twenty-five, the age of limitless discontent, alone in the world and intensely ambitious.

But he was far from guessing the extraordinary nature of the proposition that was about to be put up to him.

II

"Mr. Gildersleeve wishes to see you alone in his stateroom."

Hammond noted that much of the previous enthusiasm had gone from the little consul's manner. His tone now was businesslike, matter-of-fact. No doubt, conjectured Hammond, he had hoped to be a party to the interview he had been instrumental in bringing about.

At the door of Gildersleeve's stateroom, Hammond shook the hand of Eulas Daly with a word of thanks for the interest he had volunteered in the matter. "I'll see you later and tell you all about it," he said, a promise, which, for unexpected reasons, he never kept.

Hammond found Gildersleeve with a litter of papers and documents scattered about him and more protruding from the open jaws of a travelling-bag. He was the cut of a typical captain of big business; middle-aged, iron-grey, with a keen, cold face and the drift of a busy career stamped all over his personality. Two tiny spots, livid white, one below either eye, lent rather a sinister tone to his face, especially

when his brilliant dark eyes, set too close to the hawklike nose, were looking straight at you. At first glance, those two marks appeared to be birth-marks, but closer scrutiny disclosed them to be scars.

He did not offer his hand at first; just favoured the younger man with a glance that was as swift as it was penetrating, then turned the document on the little leaf-table before him face down and motioned his visitor to a seat. When he spoke, Hammond felt an electric urge to be brief and to the point.

"Mr. Daly has told me what he knows of you," he opened. "Now, will you kindly oblige me with such detail as you think important about yourself and your capabilities?"

Hammond's training had disciplined him in the terse use of language. He told it all in less than ten minutes' time.

Gildersleeve appraised him keenly, interestedly. "Good," he approved. "You'll no doubt do, provided you care to accept what I have to offer you. In any case, can I expect you to regard this interview as strictly confidential?"

"You can," replied Hammond simply. "As you no doubt know, such a promise from a newspaperman is regarded as sacred."

"Then we'll get down to business. Would you, for instance, be prepared to undertake an assignment, entailing little effort beyond strict caution and secrecy, without being too inquisitive as to what its objects were?"

"That would depend on a number of things," cautiously suggested the younger man. "It would have to be distinctly understood it was clean and above-board."

"The moral side of it need not for a moment worry you," smiled Gildersleeve. "You will be asked to do nothing that

would conflict with your standards of honour, however strict they may be. In fact, in this particular case, it would be best for you to avoid even the appearance of trickery.”

“If I knew more about the nature of the job, Mr. Gildersleeve, I could better judge my capabilities of taking hold.”

“Your newspaper training in mixing with men, combined with a close-mouthed attitude will carry you through,” assured the other. “I’m not saying there will be no risks, but such risks will be largely contingent upon your own shrewd behaviour.”

Gildersleeve gazed at the window for a silent moment, then continued: “The proposition in brief is this: You are to secure for yourself a position of a clerical nature; say pole-counter, time-keeper or office-assistant, with the North Star Towing and Contracting Company, out at their camps on the Nannabijou pulpwood limits, located about twenty miles south-east of the Port of Kam City, on the North Shore of Lake Superior. You are to hold whatever job you select till I communicate with you, and, while you are engaged at it you are to forget that you have been a newspaper man, maintaining absolute silence to all concerned as to your past and as to why I sent you out there. On these two points, I’d like to repeat with emphasis, *you must be particularly cautious.*

“Now, as to remuneration: You will be paid by me personally on the completion of the contract at the rate of one thousand dollars a month for such time as you put in in addition to such salary as you draw for your work from the company operating the limits. Afterwards, if you point up to my expectations, I’ll be in a position to offer you a berth that will perhaps be more congenial and unclouded by the mystery that must for the time being surround this one.

“What do you think about it, Mr. Hammond?”

Hammond was for the moment lost for an answer. This high-salaried offer, though it distinctly appealed to his adventuring spirit, took him off his feet and the concealed object of his mission at the pulpwood limits made him hesitate.

“I am not expected to spy on any one?” he insisted.

“I have assured you there will be nothing underhand about it,” Gildersleeve reminded him.

“There is, however, a possibility I might not succeed in securing a position with the contracting company.”

“There is such a possibility—a remote one, but the way will be made easy for you. At Kam City you will make personal application to Hon. J. J. Slack, M.P., president of the North Star Towing and Contracting Company, presenting to him a letter of introduction I will furnish you with.”

The train slowed down to a grinding stop at a small flag station. It was but a moment till it was in motion again.

“I’ll take it,” decided Hammond.

Before Gildersleeve could reply there came a light, insistent tapping at the door of the stateroom. A coloured porter entered, bearing a sealed envelope, passed it to Gildersleeve with a flash of very white teeth and retired.

Gildersleeve ripped the message from the envelope, glanced at its contents and pushed the button at his elbow. “Porter,” he requested when the latter re-appeared, “how long does the train stop at Moose Horn Station?”

“Twenty minutes, sah. We take on watah there, sah.”

"Very well, porter," acknowledged Gildersleeve, passing the black man a tip.

He reached for pen and railway stationery, and while he wrote hurriedly said: "This note to J. J. Slack will act as the *open sesame* to the job, Mr. Hammond. You may read it before I seal it."

Hammond took the proffered sheet and read:—

En Route to Kam City, Sept. 23.

Hon. J. J. Slack, M.P.,
Pres. North Star Co.,
Kam City, Ontario.

My dear Slack:—Am under immediate necessity of finding a berth out in the woods for the bearer, Louis Hammond. Put him on at a clerical job, not too arduous, at a good salary and charge the latter up to my account. Please do so as quietly as possible, as it is highly essential that my connection in this matter should remain absolutely confidential. Yours very truly,

NORMAN T. GILDERSLEEVE.

"Now, Mr. Hammond," Gildersleeve went on as he sealed and addressed the envelope, "we'll consider the matter closed for the present. Sorry for the terrific rush, but there is an emergent matter that presses for my immediate attention."

He arose and grasped the young man's hand. That strong grip was reassuring, but it did not altogether dissipate a presentiment growing on Hammond that he had let himself in for something that was even more potential in its possibilities than it looked to be on the surface. There was no more to be said, however, unless he changed his mind

and threw up the whole thing. He had not the slightest desire to do that.

III

Outside the stateroom door, Hammond stopped dead in his tracks. He was looking into a woman's face that was startlingly, unreally beautiful.

She had risen from among the chairs in the drawing-room of the coach, a dazzling apparition with great wonder eyes under finely-pencilled, high-arched brows. For the moment he was conscious he was staring stupidly, unable to help himself; then her dark-fringed eyelids dropped and the faintest traces of a vagrant smile lit up her divinely-moulded features.

Hammond swung hastily down the aisle. Quite in a whirl he pitched into the smoker. The train slowed down under a sudden shuddering of air-brakes.

He looked out the window. A sign-board on the tiny frame building beyond the equally diminutive platform told him it was Moose Horn Station.

A stateroom door opened somewhere and he heard a passenger hurry along the aisle, out of the coach and down the train steps. Next instant he saw Norman T. Gildersleeve, the man he had just been talking to, appear on the station platform, wearing a light overcoat and carrying a small black bag. Gildersleeve looked swiftly about the area where the dull station lamp-light and the glow from the car windows fell, then hurried around the side of the station building and disappeared in the shadows.

He had barely gone when another form seemed to rise out of the shadows near the train somewhere, a tall, graceful

figure of a woman in sable furs and wearing a large picture hat. As if Hammond's stare had attracted her, she turned and glanced for a fleeting instant at the car window. Hers was a savage, dark beauty with eyes so intense they glowed like luminous discs of blackness in the shadowy light.

The woman went rapidly to the station, passed in the door, remained a moment, re-appeared and returned down the platform to the train.

Hammond strode out to the vestibuled platform of the coach. He watched the station area closely for Norman T. Gildersleeve's return. But Gildersleeve did not come back.

The engine's bell sounded.

Hammond thought of his berth, but some movement within drew his gaze through the glass door of the compartment coach. The door of Gildersleeve's stateroom was open, and the little grey man, Eulas Daly, passed in, closing the door behind him. Hammond was sure Gildersleeve was not with him and that he could not have preceded him.

The young man was about to leave when a silent form emerged from the shadow near the coach door. It was the wonderful girl he had seen in the drawing-room, but there was great perplexity in her face now. The train was rapidly accumulating the even roar of its maximum speed.

The girl looked back and her eyes met Hammond's beyond the glass of the platform door. Her hand went to her lips as though to stifle a cry that trembled there. The fright registered upon her face went to him like the stab of a knife. Plainly, he was the cause of that fright. Mystified, and somehow deeply hurt, he drew back into the shadows and she fled like one fearing for her life.

With confusion still upon him, Hammond hurried to his berth in the pullman.

CHAPTER III

“HONOUR SINKS WHERE COMMERCE LONG PREVAILS”

I

NEXT morning the events of the previous evening all seemed to Hammond like a hazy dream. Only the sealed letter from Gildersleeve to Hon. J. J. Slack, M.P., president of the North Star Towing and Contracting Company, smacked of tangibility, for he saw nothing further of Gildersleeve, the girl with the high-arched eyebrows or even the U.S. consul, Eulas Daly. His sense of good form prevented him from prowling back through the compartment coach, and he was really pressed for time to dress and breakfast before the train pulled into Kam City.

His first experience was a disappointment. At the head office of the North Star Company he was informed that Hon. J. J. Slack was away at the Dominion capital on business, but would possibly be back before noon of the following day. He had therefore a wait of two days in the lakeport city.

Hammond improved his time by paying a visit to the sites of two enormous pulp and paper mills under course of construction near the water front. There was a curious rivalry of big interests told of there. The young man was the more interested on learning that one of these plants, the Kam City Pulp and Paper mill, was to derive its supply of pulp poles almost exclusively from the Nannabijou Limits,

the largest in all the North, a government block on which the Kam City Company had secured conditional rights to the timber that very summer after a long legal battle with competitors and the signing of a hard and fast agreement with the Ontario government that their mill must be running to full capacity, manufacturing paper from wood cut on the Nannabijou Limits by October the twenty-third of that very year. In case they were not in a position to do so from any cause whatsoever they stood to lose all rights to the timber.

The stories which Hammond gained from various sources regarding this situation were conflicting and at best rather incoherent. Out of it all he gathered that it was the result of a war between two highly capitalised organisations to gain the supremacy. It seemed that originally both the North Star Company and the Kam City Company were applicants for the cutting rights on the Nannabijou, and because a pledge had been made by the government during an election campaign that not one pole might be cut and carried away from the limits unless it were manufactured into paper in Kam City, both companies, to prove their good faith, had purchased sites in Kam City and had started the building of their mills before their applications went in. The North Star Company was finally awarded the rights to the limits on an explicit agreement that they were to have their mill in full operation the following October. There was an additional stipulation that in order to renew their yearly rights on October the twenty-third they must commence the installation of their machinery by June the first. This latter clause, it was said, was added because of the North Star's reputation for trickery, the government being determined that whoever cut the poles on the Nannabijou must be making paper from them on the specified date, October the twenty-third.