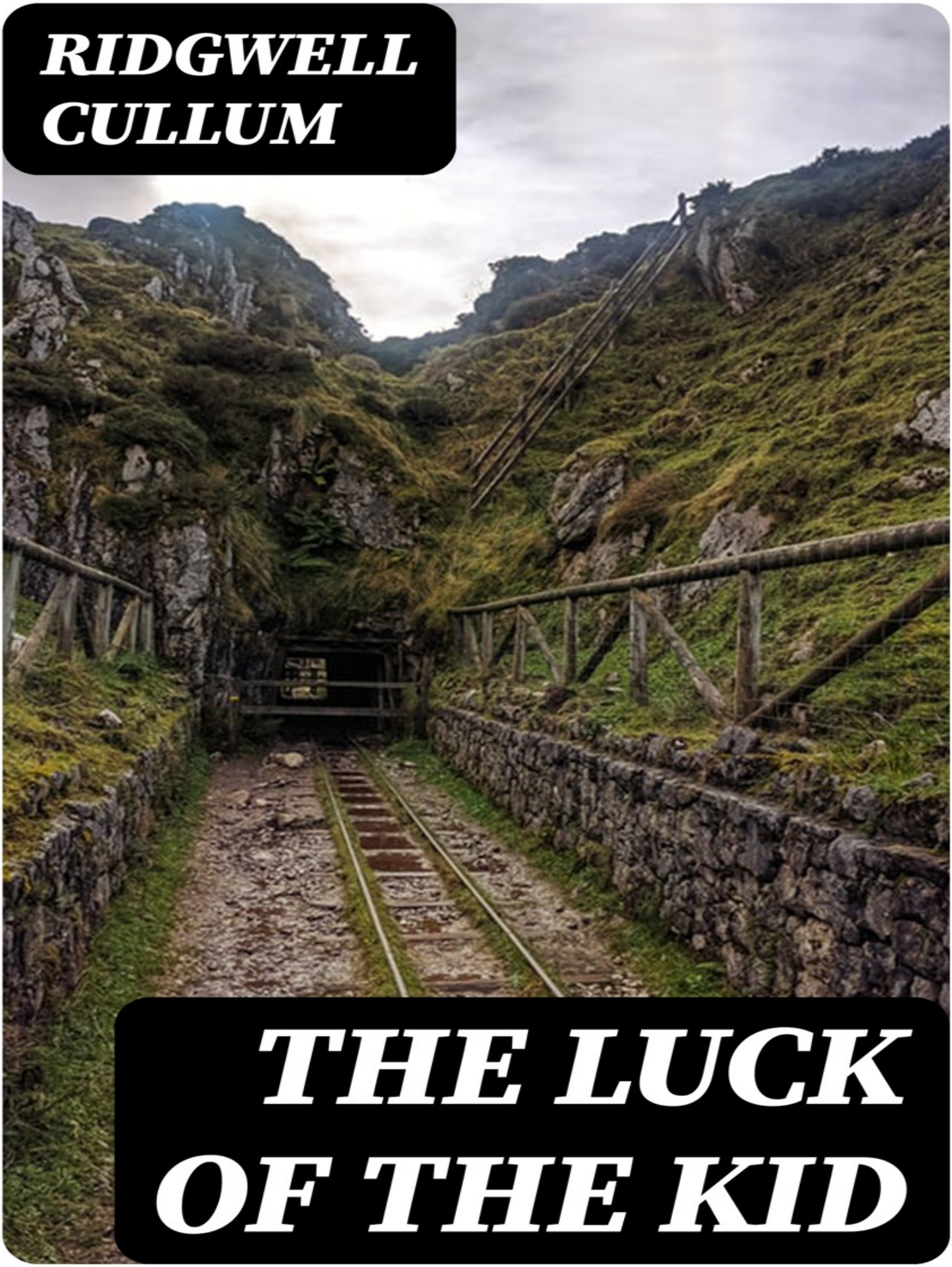
RIDGWELL CULLUM



THE LUCK OF THE KID

Ridgwell Cullum

The Luck of the Kid

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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PART I

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CHAPTER I

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NORTH OF “SIXTY”

The sub-Arctic summer was at its height. The swelter of heat was of almost tropical intensity. No wisp of cloud marred the perfect purity of the steely blue sky, and no breath of wind relieved the intemperate scorch of the blazing sun.

The two men on the river bank gave no heed to the oppressive heat. For the moment they seemed concerned with nothing but their ease, and the swarming flies, and the voracious attacks of the mosquitoes from which the smoke of their camp fire did its best to protect them. Down below them, a few yards away, their walrus-hide kyak lay moored to the bank of the river, whose sluggish, oily-moving waters flowed gently northward towards the far-off fields of eternal ice. It was noon, and a rough midday meal had been prepared and disposed of. Now they were smoking away a leisurely hour before resuming their journey.

The younger of the two flung away the end of a cigarette with a movement that was almost violent in its impatience. He turned a pair of narrow black eyes upon his companion, and their sparkle of resentment shone fiercely in sharp contrast against the dusky skin of their setting.

“It’s no use blinding ourselves, sir,” he said, speaking rapidly in the tongue of the whiteman, with only the faintest suspicion of native halting. “It’s here. But we’ve missed it. And another’s found it.”

He was a youthful creature something short of the completion of his second decade. But that which he lacked in years he made up for in the alertness of purpose that looked out of his keen eyes. He was dark-skinned, its hue something between yellow and olive. He had prominent, broad cheek bones like those of all the natives of Canada’s extreme north. Yet his face differed from the general low type of the Eskimo. There was refinement in every detail of it. There was something that suggested a race quite foreign, but curiously akin.

“Marty Le Gros? Yes?”

The older man stirred. He had been lounging full length on the ground so that the smoke of the camp fire rolled heavily across him, and kept him safe from the torment of winged insects. Now he sat up like the other, and crossing his legs tucked his booted feet under him.

He was older than his companion by more than twenty years. But the likeness between them was profound. He, too, was dusky. He, too, had the broad, high cheek bones. He was of similar stature, short and broad. Then, too, his hair was black and cut short like the other’s, so short, indeed, that it bristled crisply over the crown of his bare head with the effect of a wire brush. He, too, was clad in the rough buckskin of the trail with no detail that could have distinguished him from the native. The only difference

between the two was in age, and the colour of their eyes. The older man's eyes were a sheer anachronism. They were a curious gleaming yellow, whose tawny depths shone with a subtle reflection of the brilliant sunshine.

"Tell me of it again, Sate," he went on, knocking out the red clay pipe he had been smoking, and re-filling it from a beaded buckskin pouch.

But the youth was impatient, and the quick flash of his black eyes was full of scorn for the unruffled composure of the other.

"He's beaten us, father," he cried. "He has it. I have seen." He spread out his hands in an expressive gesture. And they were lean, delicate hands that were almost womanish. "This priest-man with his say-so of religion. He search all the time. It is the only thing he think of. Gold! Well, he get it."

He finished up with a laugh that only expressed fierce chagrin.

"And he get it here on this Loon Creek, that you make us waste three months' search on, son?"

The father shook his head. And his eyes were cold, and the whole expression of his set features mask-like. The youth flung out his hands.

"I go down for trade to Fort Cupar. This missionary, Marty Le Gros, is there. He show this thing. Two great nuggets, clear yellow gold. Big? They must be one hundred ounces each. No. Much more. And he tell the story to McLeod, who drinks so much, that he find them on Loon Creek. I hear him tell. I listen all the time. They don't know me. They think I am a fool Eskimo. I let them think. Well? Where is it on Loon Creek? We go up. We come down. There is no sign anywhere. No work. The man lies, for all his religion. Or we are the fools we do not think we are."

Sate turned his searching eyes on the northern distance, where the broad stream merged itself into the purple of low, far-off hills.

It was a scene common enough to the lower lands of Canada's extreme north. There was nothing of barren desolation. There were no great hills, no great primordial forests along the broad valley of Loon Creek. But it was a widespread park land of woodland bluffs of hardy conifers dotting a brilliant-hued carpet of myriads of Arctic flowers, and long sun-forced grasses, and lichens of every shade of green. It was Nature's own secret flower garden, far out of the common human track, where, throughout the ages, she had spent her efforts in enriching the soil, till, under an almost tropical summer heat, it yielded a display of vivid colour such as could never have been matched in any wilderness under southern skies.

The older man observed him keenly.

"Sate, my son," he said at last, "you are discontented. Why? This man has a secret. He has gold. Gold is the thing we look for. Not all the time, but between our trade which makes us rich, and our people rich. We are masters of the north country. It is ours by right of the thing we do. It must be ours. And all its secrets. This man's secret. We must have it, too."

The man spoke quietly. He spoke without a smile, without emotion. His tawny eyes were expressionless, for all the blaze of light the sun reflected in them.

"You are right to be discontented," he went on, after the briefest pause. "But I look no longer on Loon Creek or any other creek. We get this secret from Marty Le Gros. I promise that."

"How?"

The youth's quick eyes were searching his father's face. He had listened to the thing he had hoped to hear. And now

he was stirred to a keen expectancy that was without impatience.

The other shrugged his powerful shoulders.

“He will tell it to us—himself.”

The black eyes of the youth abruptly shifted their gaze. Something in the curious eyes of his parent communicated the purpose lying behind his words. But it was insufficient to satisfy his headlong impulse.

“He? He tell his secret to—us?”

There was derision in the challenge.

“Yes. He will tell—when I ask him.”

“But it is far south and west. It is beyond—our territory. It is within the reach of the northern police. There is big risk for you to ask him the—question.”

Again the man with the yellow eyes shook his head.

“Your mother looked for you to be a girl. Maybe her wish had certain effect. Risk? There is no risk. I see none. It is simple. I bend this man to my will. If he will not bend I break him. Yes. He is white. That is as it should be. Someday—sometime the whites of this country will bend, or break before us. They know that. They fear that. The thing they do not yet know is that they bend now. This man, Le Gros, we will see to him without delay.”

He rose from his cross-legged position almost without an effort. He stood up erect, a short, broad-shouldered, virile specimen of manhood in his hard trail clothing. Then he moved swiftly down towards the light canoe at the water’s edge.

The youth, Sate, was slow to follow him. He watched the sturdy figure with unsmiling eyes. He resented the imputation upon his courage. He resented the taunt his father had flung. But his feelings carried nothing deeper than the natural resentment of a war-like, high-strung spirit.

He understood his father. He knew him for a creature of iron nerve, and a will that drove him without mercy. More than that he admitted the man’s right to say the thing he chose to his son. His attitude was one of curious filial submission whatever the hurt he suffered. He may have been inspired by affection, or it may simply have been an expression of the filial obedience and subservience native to the race from which he sprang. But the taunt hurt him sorely. And he jumped to a decision as violent as it was impulsive.

He leapt to his feet, slight, active as a panther, and hastily descended to the water’s edge and joined his parent.

“You think me like a woman, father? You think that?” he demanded hotly.

The other turned eyes that gained nothing of gentleness from their smile.

“No,” he said, and bent again to his work of hauling the little craft clear of the drift-wood that had accumulated about it.

The youth breathed a deep sigh. It was an expression of relief.

“We put that question to this Le Gros soon? Yes?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Sate nodded, and a great light shone in his black eyes. They were fierce with exultation.

“Then we must waste no time. The way is long. There are many miles to Fox Bluff.” He laughed. “Le Gros,” he went on. “It is a French name, and it means—Tcha!” he exclaimed with all the impetuous feeling which drove him like a whirlwind. “We show him what it means.”

The man with the tawny eyes looked up from his work. For one moment he gazed searchingly into the dark face of his

son. Then he returned again to his work without a word.

CHAPTER II

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THE HOLOCAUST

“Man, I’d sooner they’d put out my eyes, or cut out my tongue. I’d sooner they’d set my body to everlasting torture. Look! Look there! Yes, and there! Oh, God! It’s everywhere the same.” A shaking hand was outthrust. “Dead! Mutilated! Old men! Old women! And poor little bits of life that had only just begun. The barbarity! The monstrousness!”

Marty Le Gros, the missionary of the Hekor River, spoke in a tone that was almost choking with grief. His eyes, so dark and wide, were full of the horror upon which they gazed. His Gallic temperament was stirred to its depths. The heart of the man was overflowing with pity and grief, and outraged parental affection.

Usak, the Indian, his servant, stood beside him. He offered no verbal comment. His only reply to the white-man was a low, fierce, inarticulate grunt, which was like the growl of some savage beast.

The men were standing at the entrance to a wide clearing. The great Hekor River flowed behind them, where the canoe they had just left swung to the stream, moored at the crude landing stage of native manufacture. They were gazing upon the setting of a little Eskimo encampment. It was one of the far flung Missions which claimed the spiritual service of Le Gros. He had only just arrived from his headquarters at Fox Bluff, on the river, near by to Fort Cupar the trading post, on his monthly visit, and the hideous destruction he had discovered left him completely staggered and helpless.

The devastation of the settlement was complete. Dotted about the clearing, grimly silhouetted against a background of dull green woods, stood the charred remains of a dozen and more log shanties. Broken and burnt timbers littered the open ground, and filled the room spaces where the roofs had fallen. Every habitation was burnt out stark. Not even the crude household goods had been spared.

But this was the least of the horror the two men gazed upon. The human aspect of the destruction was a thousand-fold more appalling. The ground was littered with mutilated dead. As the missionary had said, there were old men, old women, and babes torn from their mothers' arms. Silent and still, death reigned everywhere. The young men? The young women? There was no sign of these. And therein lay a further horror which the onlookers were swift to appreciate.

The hideous fascination of the scene held them. But at last it was Usak who broke from under its spell.

"Euralians!" he cried fiercely. And again in his voice rang that note which sounded like the goaded fury of some creature of the forest.

The Euralians!

To the mind of every far northwestern man, in that territory which lies hundreds of miles beyond the efficient protection of the northern police, the name of this people was sufficient to set stirring a chill of unvoiced terror that was something superstitious. Who they were? It was almost impossible to say. It was still a problem in the minds of even the farthest travelled trail men and fur hunters. But they were known to all as a scourge of the far flung border which divides Alaska from the extreme north of Yukon Territory.

The threat they imposed on the region was constantly growing. It had grown lately from the marauding of mere seal ground and fur poachers, who came down out of the iron fastnesses beyond the Arctic fringes of Alaska, where

they lived hidden in security beyond the reach of the strong arm of the United States law, into a murder scourge threatening all human life and property within reach of their ruthless operations.

Hitherto, Le Gros had only known them from the tales told by the native pelt hunters, the men who came down to trade at Fort Cupar. He knew no more and no less than the rest of the handful of white folks who peopled the region. The stories he had had to listen to, for all their corroborative nature, were, he knew, for the most part founded upon hearsay. He had listened to them. He always listened to these adventurers. But somehow his gentle, philosophic mind had left him missing something of the awe and dread which beset the hearts of the men whose lurid stories took vivid colour from the stirring emotions which inspired them.

But now, now he was wide awake to the reality of the terror he had so largely attributed to superstitious exaggeration. Now he knew that no story he had ever listened to could compare with the reality. He was gazing upon a scene of hideous murder and wanton, savage destruction that utterly beggared description.

His feelings were torn to shreds, and his heart cried out in agony of helpless pity.

These poor benighted folk, these simple, peaceful Eskimo, amiable, industrious, yearning only for the betterment he was able by his simple ministrations to bring into their lives. What were they to claim such barbarity from a savage horde? What had they? What had they done? Nothing. Simply nothing. They were fisher-folk who spent their lives in the hunt, asking only to be left in peace to work out the years of their desperately hard-lived lives. Now—now they were utterly wiped out, a pitiful sacrifice to the insensate lust of this mysterious scourge.

Le Gros thrust his cap from his broad forehead. It was a gesture of impotent despair.

“God in Heaven!” he cried, and the words seemed to be literally wrung from him.

“It no use to call Him.”

The Indian’s retort came on the instant. And his tone was harshly ironical.

“What I tell you plenty time,” he went on sharply. “The great God. He look down. He see this thing. He do nothing. No. It this way. Man do this. Yes. Man do this. Man must punish this dam Euralian. I know.”

The missionary turned from the slaughter ground. He searched the Indian’s broad, dusky face. It was a striking face, high-boned and full of the eagle keenness of the man’s Sioux Indian forbears. He was a creature of enormous stature, lean, spare and of tremendous muscle. For all he was civilized, for all he was educated, this devoted servant lacked nothing of the savage which belonged to his red-skinned ancestors.

Servant and master these two comrades in a common cause stood in sharp contrast. Usak was a savage and nothing could make him otherwise. Usak was a man of fierce, hot passions. The other, the whiteman, except for his great stature, was in direct antithesis. The missionary was moulded in the gentlest form. He was no priest. He represented no set denomination of religion. He was a simple man of compassionate heart who had devoted his life to the service of his less fortunate fellow creatures where such service might help them towards enlightenment and bodily and spiritual comfort.

He had been five years on his present mission at Fox Bluff. He had come there of his own choice supported by the staunch devotion of a young wife who was no less prepared to sacrifice herself. But now he stood almost alone, but not

quite. For though death had swiftly robbed him of a wife's devotion, it had left him with the priceless possession they had both so ardently yearned. The motherless Felice was at home now in the care of Pri-loo, the childless wife of Usak, who had gladly mothered the motherless babe.

Even as he gazed into the Indian's furious eyes Le Gros' mind had leaped back to his home at Fox Bluff. A sudden fear was clutching at his heart. Oh, he knew that Fox Bluff was far away to the east and south. He knew that the journey thither from the spot where they stood was a full seven days' of hard paddling on the great river behind them. But Pri-loo and his infant child were alone in his home. They were utterly without protection except for the folk at the near-by Fort. And these Euralians, if they so desired, what was to stop them with the broad highway of the river which was open to all?

He shook his head endeavouring to stifle the fears that had suddenly beset him.

"You're wrong, Usak," he said quietly. "God sees all. He will punish—in his own good time."

Usak's fierce eyes snapped.

"You say that? Oh, yes. You say that all the time, boss," he cried. "I tell you—no. You my good boss. You mak me man to know everything so as a whiteman knows. You show me all thing. You teach me. You mak me build big reindeer farm so I live good, an' Pri-loo eat plenty all time. Oh yes. I read. I write. I mak figgers. You mak me do this thing. You, my good boss. I mak for you all the time. I big heart for you. That so. But no. I tell you—No! The great God not know this thing. He not know this Euralian wher' he come from. No. Not no more as you he know this thing. But I know. I—Usak. I know 'em all, everything."

At another time the missionary would have listened to the man's quaint egoism with partly shocked amusement. His

final statement, however, startled him out of every other feeling.

“You know the hiding-place of these—fiends?” he demanded sharply.

Usak nodded. A curious vanity was shining in the dark eyes which looked straight into the whiteman’s.

“I know him—yes,” he said.

“You’ve never told a thing of this before?”

There was doubt in the missionary’s tone, and in the regard of his brown eyes.

“I know him,” Usak returned shortly. Then, in a moment, he flung out his great hands in a vehement gesture. “I say I know him—an’ we go kill ’em all up.”

All doubt was swept from the missionary’s mind. He understood the passionate savagery underlying the Indian’s veneer of civilization. The man was in desperate earnest.

“No.” Le Gros’ denial came sharply. Then his gaze drifted back to the scene of destruction, and a deep sigh escaped him. “No,” he reiterated simply. “This is not for us. It is for the police. If you know the hiding-place of these—”

“No good, boss. No,” Usak cried, in fierce disappointment. “The p’lice? No. They so far.” He held up one hand with two fingers thrusting upwards. “One—two p’lice by Placer. An’ Placer many days far off. No good.” He shrugged his great shoulders. “Us mans all dead. Yes. Pri-loo all dead. Felice dead, too. All mans dead when p’lice come. I know. You not know. You good man. You not think this thing. Usak bad man Indian. He think this thing all time. Listen. I tell you, boss, my good boss. I say the thing in my mind. The thing I know.”

He broke off and glanced in the direction of the river, and his eyes dwelt on the gently rocking canoe. He turned again, and his thoughtful eyes came once more to the scene of horror that infuriated his savage heart. He was like a man

preparing to face something of desperate consequence. Something that might grievously disturb the relations in which he stood to the man to whom he believed himself to owe everything he now treasured in life. At last his hands stirred. They were raised, and moved automatically under emotions which no words of his were adequate to express.

“I big trail man,” he began. “I travel far. I go by the big ice, by the big hills, by the big water. I mak trade with all mans Eskimo. I mak big reindeer trade with him Eskimo, same as you show me, boss. So I go far, far all time. So I know this Euralian better as ’em all. I not say. Oh, no. It not good. Now I say. This mans Euralian look all time for all thing. Furs? Yes. They steal ’em furs, an’ kill ’em up all Eskimo. So Eskimo all big scare. Gold? Yes. They look for him all same, too. Oil? Yes. Coal? Yes. All this thing they look, look for all time. Him mans not Eskimo. They not Indian. They not whiteman. No. They damn foreign devil so as I not know. Him all mans live in whiteman house all time. Big house. I know. I find him house.”

The man’s unease had passed. He was absorbed in the thing he had to tell. Suddenly after a moment’s pause, he raised a hand pointing so that his wondering companion turned again to the spectacle he would gladly have avoided.

“Boss, you mak ’em this thing! You mak ’em kill all up! You!”

“I?”

Le Gros’ horrified gaze swept back to the face of the accusing man. The Indian was fiercely smiling. He nodded.

“You mak ’em this, but you not know. You not know nothing,” he said in a tone that was almost gentle. “Oh, I say ’em this way, but I not mean you kill ’em all up. You? No. Listen, boss,” he went on, coming close up and lowering his harsh tones. “You kill ’em all up because you tell all the mans you mak big find gold on Loon Creek. Boss, you tell

the mans. You think all mans good like so as you. So you not hide this thing. You tell ’em, an’ you show big piece gold—two. Now you know how you kill ’em all up.”

Usak waited. The amazement in the eyes of the missionary gave place to a grave look of understanding.

“You mean that my story of the discovery of gold I made has caused—this?” He shook his head, and the question in his mild eyes was urgent. “How? Tell me, Usak, and tell it quick.”

The Indian nodded.

“Oh, it easy. Yes. You tell the story. It go far. It go quick. All mans know it. Gold! The good boss, Le Gros, find gold! Him Euralian. Ears, eyes, they all time everywhere. Him hear, too. Maybe him *see*, too. I not say. Him mak big think. Him say: ‘This man, this good boss, him find gold! How we get it? How we rob him, an’ steal ’em all up gold! Euralian think. It easy. Le Gros good man. Us go. Us kill ’em all up him Mission. One Mission. Two Mission. All Mission. Then us go kill up all mans at Fort Cupar. Kill up Marty Le Gros an’ Usak. Then we get ’em all this gold.’ ”

There was fierce conviction in every word the man said. For all the crudeness of his argument, if argument it could be called, the force of his convictions carried weight even with a man who was normally devoid of suspicion. Then, too, there was still the horror of the spectacle in the clearing to yield its effect. But greater than all the other’s conviction or argument, greater than all else, was the missionary’s surge of terror for the safety of his little baby daughter with her nurse back there in his home.

Le Gros breathed deeply. His dark eyes were full of the gravest anxiety. For the moment he had forgotten everything but the personal danger he had suddenly realised to be threatening.

Usak was watching him. He understood the thing that was stirring behind the whiteman's troubled eyes. He had driven home his conviction and he was satisfied. Now he awaited agreement with his desire that they should themselves go and deal with these fierce marauders. He saw no reason for hesitation. He saw nothing in his desire that could make it impossible, hopeless. But then he was a savage and only applied calm reason when passion left him undisturbed. The only thing to satisfy his present mood was to go, even singlehanded if necessary, and retaliate slaughter for slaughter.

Finally it was he again who broke the silence. The spirit driving him would not permit of long restraint.

"Us go, boss?" he urged.

Marty Le Gros suddenly bestirred himself. He shook his head.

"No," he said. Then he pointed at the scene in front of them.

"We do this thing. The poor dead things must be hidden up. They were Christians, and we must give them Christian burial. After that we go. We go back home. There is my little Felice. There is your Pri-loo. They must be made safe."

The man's decision was irrevocable. The Indian recognised the tone and understood. But his disappointment was intense.

"Us not go?" he cried. His words were accompanied by a sound that was like a laugh, a harsh, derisive laugh. "So," he said. "We bury 'em all these people. Yes. The good boss say so. Then we go home, an' mak safe Felice. We mak safe Pri-loo. Then us all get kill up—sure."

CHAPTER III

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THE PLANNING OF LE GROS

It was still broad daylight for all the lateness of the hour. At this time of year darkness was unknown on the Hekor River. The sky was brilliant, with its cloudless summer blue shining with midday splendour.

Marty Le Gros was standing in the doorway of his log-built home, a home of considerable dimensions and comfort for his own hands, and those gentle hands of his dead wife, had erected every carefully trimmed log of it. He had only that day returned, sick at heart with the hideous recollection of the tragedy of his far-off Mission.

He was gazing out over the bosom of the sluggish river, so broad, so peacefully smiling as it stole gently away on its never-ending task of feeding the distant lake whose demands upon it seemed quite insatiable. His mind was gravely troubled, and it was planning the thing which had so suddenly become imperative. In a moment it seemed all the peace, all the quiet delight of his years of ardent labour amongst the Eskimo had been utterly rent and dispelled. He had been caught up in the tide of Usak's savage understanding of the position of imminent danger in which he and all his belongings were standing. The thing he contemplated must be done, and done at once.

The evening hour, for all its midday brilliance, was no less peaceful than the hours of sundown in lower latitudes. He had learned to love every mood of this far northern world from its bitter storms of winter to the tropical heat of its fly and mosquito-ridden summer. It was the appeal of the remote silence of it all; it was the breadth of that wide

northern world so far beyond the sheer pretences of civilization; it was the freedom, the sense of manhood it inspired. Its appeal had never once failed him even though it had robbed him of that tender companionship of the woman whose only thought in the world had been for him and his self-sacrificing labours.

At another time, with the perfect content of a mind at ease, he would have stood there smoking his well-charred pipe contemplating the beauty of this world he had made his own. But all that was changed now. The beauty, the calm of it all, only aggravated his moody unease.

Beyond the mile-wide river the western hills rose up to dizzy, snow-capped heights. Their far off slopes were buried under the torn beds of ages-old glacial fields, or lay hidden behind the dark forest-belts of primordial growth. The sight of them urged him with added alarm. He was facing the west, searching beyond the Alaskan border, and somewhere out there, hidden within those scarce trodden fastnesses lay the pulsing heart of the thing he had suddenly come to fear. Usak had warned him. Usak had convinced him on the seven day paddle down the river. So it was that those far-off ramparts, with their towering serrated crowns lost in the heavy mists enshrouding them, no longer appealed in their beauty. Their appeal had changed to one of serious dread.

He avoided them deliberately. His gaze came back to the nearer distance of the river, and just beyond it where the old fur-trading post, which gave its name to the region, stood out dark and staunch as it had stood for more than a century. A heavy stockade of logs, which the storms of the years had failed to destroy, encompassed it. The sight of the stockade filled him with a satisfaction it had never inspired before. He drew a deep breath. Yes, he was glad because of it. He felt that those old pelt hunters had built well and with great wisdom.

Then the wide river slipping away so gently southward. It was the road highway of man in these remotenesses, passing along just here between low foreshores of attenuated grasses and lichen-covered boulders, lit by the blaze of colour from myriads of tiny Arctic flowers. It was very, very beautiful. But its beauty was of less concern now than another thought. Just as it was a possible approach for the danger he knew to be threatening, so it was the broad highway of escape should necessity demand.

For the time Le Gros was no longer the missionary. He was no less a simple adventurer than those others who peopled the region. Spiritual things had no longer place in his thought. Temporal matters held him. His motherless child was there behind him in his home in the care of the faithful Pri-loo.

Gold! He wondered. What was the curse that clung to the dull yellow creation of those fierce terrestrial fires? A painful trepidation took possession of him as he thought of the tremendous richness of the discovery which the merest chance had flung into his hands. It had seemed absurd, curiously absurd, even at the time. He had had no desire for any of it. He had not yielded himself to the hardship and self-sacrifice of the life of a sub-Arctic missionary and retained any desire for the things which gold would yield him. Perhaps for this very reason an ironical fate had forced her favours upon him.

He had been well-nigh staggered at the wealth of his discovery, and he had laughed in sheer amazed amusement that of all people such should fall to his lot. The discovery had been his alone. Not even Usak had shared in it. There had been no reason for secrecy, so he had been prepared to give the story of it broadcast to the world.

He had shown his specimens, and he had enjoyed the mystery with which he had enshrouded his discovery when he displayed them to Jim McLeod, the factor at Fort Cupar,

and a small gathering of trailmen. This had been at first. And chance alone had saved him from revealing the locality of his discovery. It came in a flash when he had witnessed the staggering effect which the two great nuggets he offered for inspection had had upon his audience. In that moment he had realised something of the potentiality of the thing that was his.

Instantly re-action set in. Instantly he was himself transformed. The missionary fell from him. He remembered his baby girl, and became at once a plain adventurer and—father. Someday Felice would grow to womanhood. Someday he would no longer be there to tend and care for her. What could he give her that she might be freed from the hardships waiting upon a lonely girl in a world that had so little of comfort and sympathy to bestow upon the weak? Nothing. So, when they pressed him for the locality whence came his discovery, he—deliberately lied.

More than ever now was he concerned for his secret. More than ever was he concerned for the thing which the savage understanding of Usak had instilled into his simple mind. His secret must be safeguarded at once. Whatever the future might have in store for him personally he must make safe this thing for—little Felice.

A sound came to him from within the house. It was the movement of the moccasined feet of Usak's woman, Pri-loo. He spoke over his shoulder without leaving the doorway.

"Does she sleep, Pri-loo?" he inquired in a low voice. The answer came in the woman's deep, velvet tones.

"She sleep, boss."

The man bestirred himself. He turned about, and the woman's dusky beauty came under his urgent gaze.

"Then I go," he said. "I'm going right over to see Jim McLeod, at the Fort. You just sit around till Usak comes back from the farm. You won't quit this doorway till he comes

along. That so? I'll be back in a while, anyway. Felice'll be all right? You'll see to it?"

"Oh, yes. Sure. Felice all right. Pri-loo not quit. No."

There was smiling confidence and assurance in the woman's wide eyes, so dark and gentle, yet so full of the savage she really was.

"Good." Marty Le Gros reached out his hand and patted the woman's rounded shoulder under the elaborately beaded buckskin tunic she had never abandoned for the less serviceable raiment of the whitewoman. "Then I go."

The missionary nodded and passed out. And the squaw stood in his place in the doorway gazing after him as he hurried down to the canoe which lay moored at the river bank.

The scene about the Fort was one of leisurely activity. The day's work was nearly completed for all the sun was high in the heavens. The smoke of camp fires was lolling upon the still evening air, and the smell of cooking food pervaded the entire neighbourhood.

Now the store had emptied of its human, bartering freight, and with the close of the day's trading, Jim McLeod and his young wife, like all the rest, were about to retire to their evening meal.

The man was leaning on the long counter contemplating the narrow day book in which he recorded his transactions with the Eskimo, and those other trailmen who were regular customers. His wife, Hesther, young, slight and almost pretty, was standing in the open doorway regarding the simple camp scenes going on within the walls of the great stockade which surrounded their home. She was simply clad in a waist and skirt of some rough plaid material. Her soft brown eyes were alight and smiling, and their colour closely

matched the wealth of brown hair coiled neatly about her head.

“Nearly through, Jim?” she inquired after awhile.

The man at the counter looked up.

“It ain’t so bad as it’s been,” he said. “But it’s short. A hell of a piece short of what it should be.” He moved out from behind his counter and came to the woman’s side. “You know, Hes, I went into things last night. We’re three hundred seals down on the year and I’d hate to tell you the number of foxes we’re short. We’re gettin’ the left-overs. That’s it. Those darn Euralians skin the pore fools of Eskimo out of the best, an’ we get the stuff they ain’t no use for. It’s a God’s shame, gal. If it goes on ther’s jest one thing in sight. We’ll be beatin’ it back to civilization, an’ chasing up a grub stake. The company’ll shut this post right down—sure.”

The man glanced uneasily about him. His pale blue eyes were troubled as he surveyed the shelves laden with gaudy trading truck, and finally came to rest on the small pile of furs baled behind the counter ready for the storeroom. He understood his position well enough. He held it by results. The Fur Valley Trading Company was no philanthropic institution. If Fort Cupar showed no profit then Fort Cupar, so far as their enterprise was concerned, would be closed down.

He was worried. He knew that a time was coming in the comparatively near future when Hesther would need all the comfort and ease that he could afford her. If the Company closed down as it had been threatening him, it would, he felt, be something in the nature of a tragedy to them.

The woman smiled round into his somewhat fat face.

“Don’t you feel sore, Jim,” she said in her cheerful inspiriting way. “Maybe the Good God hands us folk out our trials, but I guess He’s mighty good in passing us compensations. Our compensation’s coming along, boy. An’

I’m looking forward to that time so I don’t hardly know how to wait for it.”

Jim’s blue eyes wavered before the steadfast encouragement in his wife’s confident, slightly self-conscious smile.

“Yes,” he said, and turned away again to the inadequate pile of furs that troubled him.

Nature had been less than kind to Jim McLeod. His body was ungainly with fat for all his youth. His face was puffy and almost gross, which the habit of clean shaving left painfully evident. In reality the man was keen and purposeful. He was kindly and intensely honest. His one serious weakness, the thing that had driven him to join up with the hard life of the northern adventurers was an unfortunate and wholly irresistible addiction to alcohol. In civilization he had failed utterly for that reason alone, and so, with his young wife, he had fled from temptation whither he hoped and believed his curse would be unable to follow him.

“You see, Jim,” Hesther went on reassuringly, “if they close us down, what then? I guess we’ll be only little worse off. They’ve got to see us down to our home town, and we can try again. We—”

The man interrupted her with a quick shake of the head.

“I don’t quit this north country,” he said definitely. “Ther’s things here if we can only hit ’em. And besides it’s my only chance. An’, Hes, it’s your only chance—with me. You know what I mean, dear.” He nodded. “Sure you do, gal. It means drink an’ hell—down there. It means—”

The girl laughed happily.

“Have you escaped it here, Jim?” She shook her head. “But I don’t worry so I have you. You’re mine. You’re my husband,” she went on softly. “God gave you to me, an’ whatever you are, or do, why I guess I’d rather have you

than any good angel man who lived on tea and pie-talk. Please God you'll quit the drink someday. You can't go on trying like you do without making good in the end. But even if you didn't—well, you're just mine anyway."

Jim smiled tenderly into his wife's up-turned face. And he stooped and kissed the pretty, ready lips. And somehow half his trouble seemed to vanish with the thought of the beautiful mother heart that would so soon be called upon to exercise its natural functions. This frail, warm-hearted, courageous creature was his staunch rock of support. And her simple inspiriting philosophy was the hope which always urged him on.

"That's fine, my dear," he said. "You're the best in the world, but you can't conjure furs so we can keep this darn old ship afloat. But it don't do to think that way. We'll jest think of that baby of ours that's comin' an' do our best, an'—Say!" He broke off pointing through the doorway and beyond the gateway of the great stockade in the direction of the river. "Ther's Marty comin' along up from the river—and—he's in one hell of a hurry."

The girl turned at once, her gaze following the pointing finger. The great figure of the missionary was hastily approaching. The sight of his hurry was sufficiently unusual to impress them both.

"I didn't know he'd got back." Hesther's tone was thoughtful.

Jim shook his head.

"He wasn't due back for two weeks."

"Is there—? Do you think—?"

"I guess ther's something worrying sure. He don't—"

The man broke off and placed an arm about the woman's shoulder.