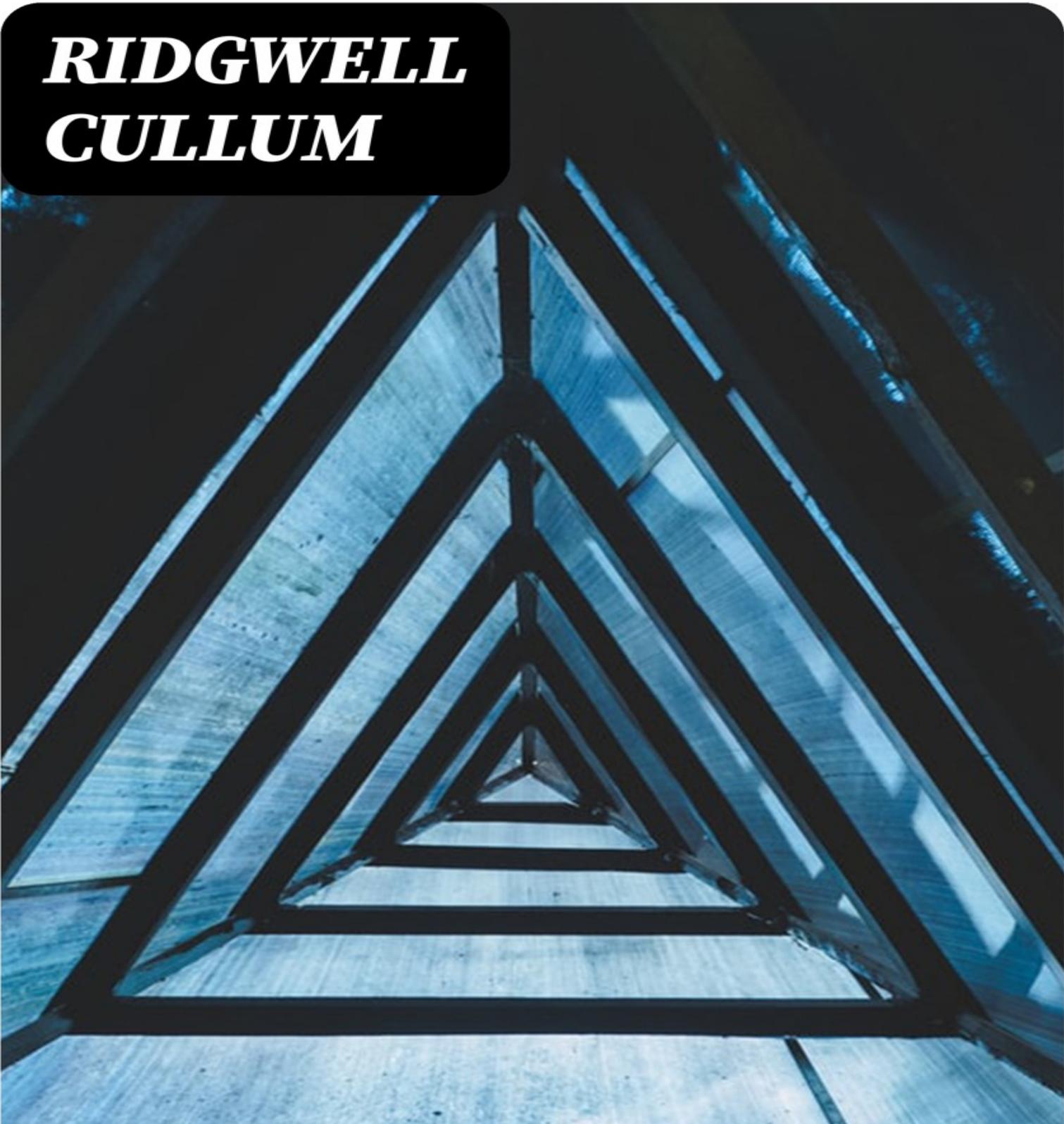


***RIDGWELL  
CULLUM***



***THE TRAIL  
OF THE AXE***

**Ridgwell Cullum**

# **The Trail of the Axe**

**A Story of Red Sand Valley**

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# CHAPTER I

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### DAVE

Dave was thirty-two, but looked forty; for, in moulding his great, strong, ugly face, Nature had been less than kind to him. It is probable, from his earliest, Dave had never looked less than ten years older than he really was.

Observing him closely, one had the impression that Nature had set herself the task of equipping him for a tremendous struggle in the battle of life; as though she had determined to make him invincible. Presuming this to have been her purpose, she set to work with a liberal hand. She gave him a big heart, doubtless wishing him to be strong to fight and of a great courage, yet with a wonderful sympathy for the beaten foe. She gave him the thews and sinews of a Hercules, probably arguing that a man must possess a mighty strength with which to carry himself to victory. To give him such physical strength it was necessary to provide a body in keeping. Thus, his shoulders were abnormally wide, his chest was of a mighty girth, his arms were of phenomenal length, and his legs were gnarled and knotted with muscles which could never be satisfactorily disguised by the class of "store" clothes it was his frugal custom to wear.

For his head Nature gave him a fine, keen brain; strong, practical, subtly far-seeing in matters commercial, bluntly honest and temperate, yet withal matching his big heart in kindly sympathy. It was thrilling with a vast energy and

capacity for work, but so pronounced was its dominating force, that in the development of his physical features it completely destroyed all delicacy of mould and gentleness of expression. He displayed to the world the hard, rugged face of the fighter, without any softening, unless, perhaps, one paused to look into the depths of his deep-set gray eyes.

Nature undoubtedly fulfilled her purpose. Dave was equipped as few men are equipped, and if it were to be regretted that his architect had forgotten that even a fighting man has his gentler moments, and that there are certain requirements in his construction to suit him to such moments, in all other respects he had been treated lavishly. Summed up briefly, Dave was a tower of physical might, with a face of striking plainness.

It was twelve years since he came to the Red Sand Valley. He was then fresh from the lumber regions of Puget Sound, on the western coast of the United States. He came to Western Canada in search of a country to make his own, with a small capital and a large faith in himself, supported by a courage that did not know the meaning of defeat.

He found the Red Sand Valley nestling in the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains. He saw the wonders of the magnificent pine woods which covered the mountain slopes in an endless sea of deep, sombre green. And he knew that these wonderful primordial wastes were only waiting for the axe of the woodsman to yield a building lumber second to none in the world.

The valley offered him everything he needed. A river that flowed in full tide all the open season, with possibilities of

almost limitless "timber booms" in its backwaters, a delicious setting for a village, with the pick of a dozen adequate sites for the building of lumber mills. He could hope to find nothing better, so he stayed.

His beginning was humble. He started with a horse-power saw-pit, and a few men up in the hills cutting for him. But he had begun his great struggle with fortune, and, in a man such as Nature had made him, it was a struggle that could only end with his life. The battle was tremendous, but he never hesitated, he never flinched.

Small as was his beginning, six years later his present great mills and the village of Malkern had begun to take shape. Then, a year later, the result of his own persistent representation, the Canadian Northwestern Railroad built a branch line to his valley. And so, in seven years, his success was practically assured.

Now he was comfortably prosperous. The village was prosperous. But none knew better than he how much still remained to be achieved before the foundations of his little world were adequate to support the weight of the vast edifice of commercial enterprise, which, with his own two hands, his own keen brain, he hoped to erect.

He was an American business man raised in the commercial faith of his country. He understood the value of "monopoly," and he made for it. Thus, when he could ill spare capital, by dint of heavy borrowings he purchased all the land he required, and the "lumbering" rights of that vast region.

Then it was that he extended operations. He abandoned his first mill and began the building of his larger enterprise

further down the valley, at a point where he had decided that the village of Malkern should also begin its growth.

Once the new mill was safely established he sold his old one to a man who had worked with him from the start. The transaction was more in the nature of a gift to an old friend and comrade. The price was nominal, but the agreement was binding that the mill should only be used for the production of small building material, and under no circumstances to be used in the production of rough "baulks." This was to protect his own monopoly in that class of manufacture.

George Truscott, the lumberman with whom he made the transaction, worked the old mills with qualified success for two years. Then he died suddenly of blood-poisoning, supervening upon a badly mutilated arm torn by one of his own saws. The mill automatically became the property of his only son Jim, a youth of eighteen, curly-headed, bright, lovable, but wholly irresponsible for such an up-hill fight as the conduct of the business his father had left him.

The master of the Malkern mills, as might be expected, was a man of simple habits and frugal tastes. In his early struggles he had had neither time nor money with which to indulge himself, and the habit of simple living had grown upon him. He required so very little. He had no luxurious home; a mere cottage of four rooms and a kitchen, over which an aged and doting mother ruled, her establishment consisting of one small maid. His office was a shack of two rooms, bare but useful, containing one chair and one desk, and anything he desired to find a temporary safe resting-place for strewn about the floor, or hung upon nails driven

into the walls. It was all he needed, a roof to shade him from the blazing summer sun when he was making up his books, and four walls to shut out the cruel blasts of the Canadian winter.

He was sitting at his desk now, poring over a heap of letters which had just arrived by the Eastern mail. This was the sort of thing he detested. Correspondence entailed a lot of writing, and he hated writing. Figures he could cope with, he had no grudge against them, but composing letters was a task for which he did not feel himself adequately equipped; words did not flow easily from his pen. His education was rather the education of a man who goes through the world with ears and eyes wide open. He had a wide knowledge of men and things, but the inside of books was a realm into which he had not deeply delved.

At last he pushed his letters aside and sat back, his complaining chair protesting loudly at the burden imposed upon it. He drew an impatient sigh, and began to fill his pipe, gazing through the rain-stained window under which his untidy desk stood. He had made up his mind to leave the answering of his letters until later in the day, and the decision brought him some relief.

He reached for the matches. But suddenly he altered his mind and removed his pipe from his mouth. A smile shone in his deep-set eyes at the sight of a dainty, white figure which had just emerged from behind a big stack of milled timber out in the yard and was hurrying toward the office.

He needed no second glance to tell him who the figure belonged to. It was Betty—little Betty Somers, as he loved

to call her—who taught the extreme youth of Malkern out of her twenty-two years of erudition and worldly wisdom.

He sprang from his chair and went to the door to meet her, and as he walked his great bulk and vast muscle gave his gait something of the roll of a sailor. He had no lightness, no grace in his movements; just the ponderous slowness of monumental strength. He stood awaiting her in the doorway, which he almost filled up.

Betty was not short, but he towered above her as she came up, his six feet five inches making nothing of her five feet six.

"This is bully," he cried delightedly, as she stood before him. "I hadn't a notion you were getting around this morning, Betty."

His voice was as unwieldy as his figure; it was husky too, in the manner of powerful voices when their owners attempt to moderate them. The girl laughed frankly up into his face.

"I'm playing truant," she explained. Then her pretty lips twisted wryly, and she pointed at the lintel of the door. "Please sit down there," she commanded. Then she laughed again. "I want to talk to you, and—and I have no desire to dislocate my neck."

He made her feel so absurdly small; she was never comfortable unless he was sitting down.

The man grinned humorously at her imperious tone, and sat down. They were great friends, these two. Betty looked upon him as a very dear, big, ugly brother to whom she could always carry all her little worries and troubles, and ever be sure of a sympathetic adviser. It never occurred to her that Dave could be anything dearer to anybody. He was

just Dave—dear old Dave, an appellation which seemed to fit him exactly.

The thought of him as a lover was quite impossible. It never entered her head. Probably the only people in Malkern who ever considered the possibility of Dave as a lover were his own mother, and perhaps Mrs. Tom Chepstow. But then they were wiser than most of the women of the village. Besides, doubtless his mother was prejudiced, and Mrs. Tom, in her capacity as the wife of the Rev. Tom Chepstow, made it her business to study the members of her husband's parish more carefully than the other women did. But to the ordinary observer he certainly did not suggest the lover. He was so strong, so cumbersome, so unromantic. Then his ways were so deliberate, so machine-like. It almost seemed as though he had taken to himself something of the harsh precision of his own mills.

On the other hand, his regard for Betty was a matter of less certainty. Good comradeship was the note he always struck in their intercourse, but oftentimes there would creep into his gray eyes a look which spoke of a warmth of feeling only held under because his good sense warned him of the utter hopelessness of it. He was too painfully aware of the quality of Betty's regard for him to permit himself any false hopes.

Betty's brown eyes took on a smiling look of reproach as she held up a warning finger.

"Dave," she said, with mock severity, "I always have to remind you of our compact. I insist that you sit down when I am talking to you. I refuse to be made to feel—and look—small. Now light your pipe and listen to me."

"Go ahead," he grinned, striking a match. His plain features literally shone with delight at her presence there. Her small oval, sun-tanned face was so bright, so full of animation, so healthy looking. There was such a delightful frankness about her. Her figure, perfectly rounded, was slim and athletic, and her every movement suggested the open air and perfect health.

"Well, it's this way," she began, seating herself on the corner of a pile of timber: "I'm out on the war-path. I want scalps. My pocketbook is empty and needs filling, and when that's done I'll get back to my school children, on whose behalf I am out hunting."

"It's your picnic?" suggested Dave.

"Not mine. The kiddies'. So now, old boy, put up your hands! It's your money or your life." And she sat threatening him with her pocketbook, pointing it at him as though it were a pistol.

Dave removed his pipe.

"Guess you'd best have 'em both," he smiled.

But Betty shook her head with a joyous laugh.

"I only want your money," she said, extending an open hand toward him.

Dave thrust deep into his hip-pocket, and produced a roll of bills.

"It's mostly that way," he murmured, counting them out.

But his words had reached the girl, and her laugh died suddenly.

"Oh, Dave!" she said reproachfully.

And the man's contrition set him blundering.

"Say, Betty, I'm a fool man anyway. Don't take any sort of notice. I didn't mean a thing. Now here's fifty, and you can have any more you need."

He looked straight into her eyes, which at once responded to his anxious smile. But she did not attempt to take the money. She shook her head.

"Too much."

But he pushed the bills into her hand.

"You can't refuse," he said. "You see, it's for the kiddies. It isn't just for you."

When Dave insisted refusal was useless. Betty had long since learned that. Besides, as he said, it was for the "kiddies." She took the money, and he sat and watched her as she folded the bills into her pocketbook. The girl looked up at the sound of a short laugh.

"What's that for?" she demanded, her brown eyes seriously inquiring.

"Oh, just nothing. I was thinking."

The man glanced slowly about him. He looked up at the brilliant summer sun. Then his eyes rested upon the rough exterior of his unpretentious office.

"It meant something," asserted Betty. "I hate people to laugh—in that way."

"I was thinking of this shack of mine. I was just thinking, Betty, what a heap of difference an elegant coat of paint makes to things. You see, they're just the same underneath, but they—kind of look different with paint on 'em, kind of please the eye more."

"Just so," the girl nodded wisely. "And so you laughed—in that way."

Dave's eyes twinkled.

"You're too sharp," he said. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

"Now about this picnic. You're expecting all the grown folk?"

The girl's eyes opened to their fullest extent.

"Of course I do. Don't you always come? It's only once a year." The last was very like a reproach.

The man avoided her eyes. He was looking out across the sea of stacked timber at the great sheds beyond, where the saws were shrieking out their incessant song.

"I was thinking," he began awkwardly, "that I'm not much good at those things. Of course I guess I can hand pie round to the folks; any fellow can do that. But——"

"But what?" The girl had risen from her seat and was trying to compel his gaze.

"Well, you see, we're busy here—desperately busy. Dawson's always grumbling that we're short-handed——"

Betty came up close to him, and he suddenly felt a gentle squeeze on his shoulder.

"You don't want to come," she said.

"'Tisn't that—not exactly."

He kept his eyes turned from her.

"You see," he went on, "you'll have such a heap of folk there. They mostly all get around—for you. Then there'll be Jim Truscott, and Jim's worth a dozen of me when it comes to picnics and 'sociables' and such-like."

The girl's hand suddenly dropped from his shoulder, and she turned away. A flush slowly mounted to her sun-tanned

cheeks, and she was angry at it. She stood looking out at the mills beyond, but she wasn't thinking of them.

At last she turned back to her friend and her soft eyes searched his.

"If—if you don't come to the picnic to-morrow, I'll never forgive you, Dave—never!"

And she was gone before his slow tongue could frame a further excuse.

## **CHAPTER II**

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### **A PICNIC IN THE RED SAND VALLEY**

Summer, at the foot of the Canadian Rockies, sets in suddenly. There are no dreary days of damp and cold when the east wind bites through to the bones and chills right down to the marrow. One moment all is black, dead; the lean branches and dead grass of last year make a waste of dreary decay. Watch. See the magic of the change. The black of the trees gives way to a warming brown; the grass, so sad in its depression, suddenly lightens with the palest hue of green. There is at once a warmth of tone which spreads itself over the world, and gladdens the heart and sets the pulses throbbing with renewed life and hope. Animal life stirs; the insect world rouses. At the sun's first smile the whole earth awakens; it yawns and stretches itself; it blinks and rubs its eyes, and presently it smiles back. The

smile broadens into a laugh, and lo! it is summer, with all the world clad in festal raiment, gorgeous in its myriads of changing color-harmonies.

It was on such a day in the smiling valley of the Red Sand River that Betty Somers held her school picnic. There were no shadows to mar the festivities she had arranged. The sky was brilliant, cloudless, and early in the season as it was, the earth was already beginning to crack and parch under the fiery sun.

A dozen democrat wagons, bedecked with flags and filled to overflowing with smiling, rosy-faced children, each wagon under the charge of one of the village matrons, set out at eight o'clock in the morning for the camping-ground. Besides these, an hour later, a large number of private buggies conveyed the parents and provender, while the young people of the village rode out on horseback as a sort of escort to the commissariat. It was a gay throng, and there could be little doubt but that the older folk were as delighted at the prospect of the outing as the children themselves.

Dave was there with the rest. Betty's challenge had had its effect. But he came without any of the enthusiasm of the rest of the young people. It was perfectly true that the demands of his mill made the outing inconvenient to him, but that was not the real reason of his reluctance. There was another, a far stronger one. All the years of his manhood had taught him that there was small place for him where the youth of both sexes foregathered. His body was too cumbersome, his tongue was too slow, and his face was too plain. The dalliance of man and maid was not for him, he

knew, and did he ever doubt or forget it, his looking-glass, like an evil spirit, was ever ready to remind and convince him.

The picnic ground was some five miles down the valley, in the depths of a wide, forest-grown glen, through which a tiny tributary of the Red Sand River tumbled its way over a series of miniature waterfalls. The place was large and magnificently rock-bound, and looked as though it had originally been chiseled by Nature to accommodate a rushing mountain torrent. It gave one the impression of a long disused waterway which, profiting by its original purpose, had become so wonderfully fertilized that its vegetation had grown out of all proportion to its capacity. It was a veritable jungle of undergrowth and forest, so dense and wide spreading as almost to shut out the dazzling sunlight. It was an ideal pleasure camping-ground, where the children could romp and play every game known to the Western child, and their elders could revel in the old, old game which never palls, and which the practice of centuries can never rob of its youth.

All the morning the children played, while the women were kept busy with the preparations for the midday feast. The men were divided up into two sections, the elders, taking office under the command of Tom Chepstow, organizing the children's games, and the other half, acknowledging the leadership of Mrs. Tom, assisting those engaged in the culinary arrangements.

As might be expected, the latter occupation found most favor with the younger men. There was far more fun in wandering through the tangled undergrowth of the riverside

to help a girl fill a kettle, than in racking one's brains for some startlingly unoriginal and long-forgotten game with which to dazzle the mind of Malkern's youth. Then there were the joys of gathering fire-wood, a task which enlisted the services of at least a dozen couples. This was a much favored occupation. There was no time limit, and it involved a long, long ramble. Then, too, it was remarkable that every girl performing the simplest duty, and one in which she never required the least assistance when at home, found it quite impossible to do so here without the strong physical and moral support of the man she most favored.

Thus the morning passed. While the girls and men flirted, and the older women took to themselves a reflected enjoyment of it all, the children shrieked their delight at the simplest game, and baited their elders with all the impudence of childhood. It was a morning of delight to all; a morning when the sluggish blood of the oldest quickened in the sunken veins; a morning when the joy of living was uppermost, and all care was thrust into the background.

It was not until after dinner that Dave saw anything of Betty. As he had anticipated, Jim Truscott never left her side, and his own morning had been spent with Tom Chepstow and the children. Then, at dinner, it had fallen to his lot to assist the matrons in waiting upon the same riotous horde. In consequence, by the time he got his own meal, Betty and the younger section of the helpers had finished theirs and were wandering off into the woods.

After dinner he sought out a secluded spot in which to smoke and—make the best of things. He felt he had earned a rest. His way took him along the bank of the little tumbling

river. It was delightfully restful, cool and shadowed by the overhanging trees that nearly met across it. It was not an easy path, but it was calmly beautiful and remote, and that was all he sought.

Just above one rapid, something larger than the others he had passed, he came to a little log footbridge. It was a delicious spot, and he sat down and filled his pipe. The murmur of the rapids below came up to him pleasantly. All the foliage about him was of that tender green inspired by the humidity of the dank, river atmosphere. Here and there the sun broke through in patches and lit up the scene, and added beauty to the remoter shadows of the woods. It was all so peaceful. Even the distant voices of the children seemed to add to the calm of his retreat.

His pipe was nearly finished, and an insidious languor was stealing over him. He nodded once or twice, almost asleep. Then he started wide awake; a familiar laughing voice sounded just behind him, calling him by name.

"Oh, Dave! So this is where you are! I've been hunting for you till—till my feet are sore."

Before he could move Betty had plumped herself down beside him on the bridge. He was wide enough awake now, and his delight at the girl's presence was so apparent that she promptly and frankly remarked upon it.

"I do believe you're glad I came, and—woke you up," she laughed.

The man leant back luxuriously and propped himself against the post of the hand-rail.

"I am, surely," he said with conviction. "I've been thinking about picnics. It seems to me they're a heap of fun——"

"So you stole away by yourself to enjoy this one."

Betty's brown eyes glanced slyly at him. There was a half smile in them, and yet they were serious. Dave began to refill his pipe.

"Well, Betty, you see I just thought I'd like a smoke. I've been with the kiddies all morning."

Suddenly the girl sat round facing him.

"Dave, I'm a little beast. I oughtn't to have made you come. I know you don't care for this sort of thing, only—well, you are so kind, and you are so fond of making people happy. And you—you— Oh, Dave, I—I want to tell you something. That's—that's why I was hunting for you."

She had turned from him, and was gazing out down the stream now. Her face was flushed a deep scarlet. For an instant she had encountered his steady gray eyes and her confusion had been complete. She felt as though he had read right down into her very soul.

Dave put his pipe away. The serious expression of his rugged face was unchanged, but the smile in his eyes had suddenly become more pronounced.

"So that's why you hunted me out?" he said gently. "Well, Betty, you can tell me."

He had seen the blushing face. He had noted the embarrassment and hesitancy, and the final desperate plunge. He knew in his heart what was coming, and the pain of that knowledge was so acute that he could almost have cried out. Yet he sat there waiting, his eyes smiling, his face calmly grave as it always was.

For nearly a minute neither spoke. Then the man's deep voice urged the girl.

"Well?"

Betty rested her face in her hands and propped her elbows on her knees. All her embarrassment had gone now. She was thinking, thinking, and when at last her words came that tone of excitement which she had used just a moment before had quite gone out of her voice.

"It's Jim," she said quietly. "He's asked me to marry him. I've promised—and—and he's gone to speak to uncle."

Dave took out his pipe again and looked into the bowl of it.

"I guessed it was that," he said, after a while. Then he fumbled for his tobacco. "And—are you happy—little Betty?" he asked a moment later.

"Yes—I—I think so."

"You think so?"

Dave was astonished out of himself.

"You only think so?" he went on, his breath coming quickly.

Betty sat quite still and the man watched her, with his pipe and tobacco gripped tightly in his great hand. He was struggling with a mad desire to crush this girl to his heart and defy any one to take her from him. It was a terrible moment. But the wild impulse died down. He took a deep breath and—slowly filled his pipe.

"Tell me," he said, and his tone was very tender.

The girl turned to him. She rested an arm on his bent knee and looked up into his face. There was no longer any hesitation or doubt. She was pale under the warm tanning of her cheeks, but she was very pretty, and, to Dave, wildly seductive as she thus appealed to him.

"Oh, Dave, I must tell you all. You are my only real friend. You, I know, will understand, and can help me. If I went to uncle, good and kind as he is, I feel he would not understand. And auntie, she is so matter-of-fact and practical. But you—you are different from anybody else."

The man nodded.

"I have loved Jim for so long," she went on hurriedly. "Long—long before he ever even noticed me. To me he has always been everything a man should and could be. You see, he is so kind and thoughtful, so brave, so masterful, so—so handsome, with just that dash of recklessness which makes him so fascinating to a girl. I have watched him pay attention to other girls, and night after night I have cried myself to sleep about it. Dave, you have never known what it is to love anybody, so all this may seem silly to you, but I only want to show you how much I have always cared for Jim. Well, after a long time he began to take notice of me. I remember it so well," she went on, with a far-away look in her eyes. "It was a year ago, at our Church Social. He spent a lot of time with me there, and gave me a box of candy, and then asked permission to see me home. Dave, from that moment I was in a seventh heaven of happiness. Every day I have felt and hoped that he would ask me to be his wife. I have longed for it, prayed for it, dreaded it, and lived in a dream of happiness. And now he has asked me."

She turned away to the bustling stream. Her eyes had become pathetically sad.

"And——" Dave prompted her.

"Oh, I don't know." She shook her head a little helplessly. "It all seems different now."

"Different?"

"Yes, that wildly happy feeling has gone."

"You are—unhappy?"

The man's voice shook as he put his question.

"It isn't that. I'm happy enough, I suppose. Only—only—I think I'm frightened now, or something. All my dreams seem to have tumbled about my ears. I have no longer that wonderful looking forward. Is it because he is mine now, and no one can take him from me? Or is it," her voice dropped to an awed whisper, "that—I—don't—"

She broke off as though afraid to say all she feared. Dave lit his pipe and smoked slowly and thoughtfully. He had gone through his ordeal listening to her, and now felt that he could face anything without giving his own secret away. He must reassure her. He must remove the doubt in her mind, for, in his quiet, reasoning way, he told himself that all her future happiness was at stake.

"No, it's not that, Betty," he said earnestly. "It's not that you love him less. It's just that for all that year you've thought and thought and hoped about it—till there's nothing more to it," he added lamely. "You see, it's the same with all things. Realization is nothing. It's all in the anticipation. You wait, little girl. When things are fixed, and Parson Tom has said 'right,' you'll—why, you'll just be the happiest little bit of a girl in Malkern. That's sure."

Betty lifted her eyes to his ugly face and looked straight into the kindly eyes. Just for one impulsive moment she reached out and took hold of his knotty hand and squeezed it.

"Dave, you are the dearest man in the world. You are the kindest and best," she cried with unusual emotion. "I wonder——" and she turned away to hide the tears that had suddenly welled up into her troubled eyes.

But Dave had seen them, and he dared not trust himself to speak. He sat desperately still and sucked at his pipe, emitting great clouds of smoke till the pungent fumes bit his tongue.

Then relief came from an unexpected quarter. There was a sharp crackling of bush just above where they sat and the scrunch of crushing pine cones trodden under foot, and Jim Truscott stepped on to the bridge.

"Ah, here you are at last. My word, but I had a job to find you."

His tone was light and easy, but his usually smiling face was clouded. Betty sprang to her feet.

"What is it, Jim?" she demanded, searching his face. "Something is wrong. I know it is."

Jim seated himself directly in front of Dave, who now watched him with added interest. He now noticed several things in the boy he did not remember having observed before. The face in repose, or rather without the smile it usually wore, bore signs of weakness about the mouth. The whole of the lower part of it lacked the imprint of keen decision. There was something almost effeminate about the mould of his full lips, something soft and yielding—even vicious. The rest of his face was good, and even intellectual. He was particularly handsome, with crisp curling hair of a light brown that closely matched his large expressive eyes. His tall athletic figure was strangely at variance with the

intellectual cast of his face and head. But what Dave most noticed were the distinct lines of dissipation about his eyes. And he wondered how it was he had never seen them before. Perhaps it was that he so rarely saw Jim without his cheery smile. Perhaps, now that Betty had told him what had taken place, his observation was closer, keener.

"What is it, Jim?" He added his voice to Betty's inquiry. Jim's face became gloomier. He turned to the girl, who had resumed her seat at Dave's side.

"Have you told him?" he asked, and for a moment his eyes brightened with a shadow of their old smile.

The girl nodded, and Dave answered for her.

"She's told me enough to know you're the luckiest fellow in the Red Sand Valley," he said kindly.

Jim glanced up into the girl's face with all the passion of his youthful heart shining in his handsome eyes.

"Yes, I am, Dave—in that way," he said. Then his smile faded out and was replaced by a brooding frown. "But all the luck hasn't come my way. I've talked to Parson Tom."

"Ah!" Dave's ejaculation was ominous.

Suddenly Jim exploded, half angrily, half pettishly, like a disappointed schoolboy.

"Betty, I've got to go away. Your uncle says so. He asked me all about my mill, what my profits were, and all that. I told him honestly. I know I'm not doing too well. He said I wasn't making enough to keep a nigger servant on. He told me that until I could show him an income of \$2,500 a year there was to be no talk of engagement. What is more, he said he couldn't have me philandering about after you until there was a reasonable prospect of that income. We talked

and argued, but he was firm. And in the end he advised me, if I were really in earnest and serious, to go right away, take what capital I had, and select a new and rising country to start in. He pointed out that there was not room enough here for two in the lumbering business; that Dave, here, complained of the state of trade, so what chance could I possibly have without a tithe of his resources. Finally, he told me to go and think out a plan, talk it over with you, and then tell him what I had decided upon. So here I am, and ——"

"So am I," added Betty.

"And as I am here as well," put in Dave, "let's talk it over now. Where are you thinking of going?"

"Seems to me the Yukon is the place. There's a big rush going on. There's great talk of fabulous fortunes there."

"Yes, fabulous," said Dave dryly. "It's a long way. A big fare. You'll find yourself amongst all the scum and blacklegs of this continent. You'll be up against every proposition known to the crook. You'll get tainted. Why not do some ranching? Somewhere around here, toward Edmonton."

Jim shook his head gloomily.

"I haven't nearly enough capital."

"Maybe I could manage it for you," said Dave thoughtfully. "I mean it as a business proposition," he added hastily.

Jim's face cleared, and his ready smile broke out like sunshine after a summer storm.

"Would you?" he cried. "Yes, a business proposition. Business interest. I know the very place," he went on

ardently. "Betty, wouldn't that be bully? How would you like to be a rancher's wife?"

But his spirits quickly received a damper. Betty shook her head.

"No, Jim. Not at Dave's expense." Then she turned to the man who had made the offer. "No, no, Dave, old friend. Jim and I know you. This is not business from your point of view. You added that to disguise your kindly intention."

"But——" Dave began to protest.

But Betty would have none of it.

"This is a debate," she said, with a brightness she did not feel, "and I am speaking. Jim," she turned gently to her lover, "we'll start fair and square with the world. You must do as uncle says. And you can do it. Do it yourself—yourself unaided. God will help you—surely. You are clever; you have youth, health and strength. I will wait for you all my life, if necessary. You have my promise, and it is yours until you come back to claim me. It may be only a year or two. We must be very, very brave. Whatever plan you decide on, if it is the Yukon, or Siberia, or anywhere else, I am content, and I will wait for you."

The girl's words were so gently spoken, yet they rang with an irrevocable decision that astonished her hearers. Dave looked into the pretty, set face. He had known her so long. He had seen her in almost every mood, yet here was a fresh side to her character he had never even suspected, and the thought flashed through his mind, to what heights of ambition might a man not soar with such a woman at his side.

Jim looked at her too. But his was a stare of amazement, and even resentment.

"But why, Betty?" he argued sharply. "Why throw away a business offer such as this, when it means almost certain success? Dave offered it himself, and surely you will allow that he is a business man before all things."

"Is he?" Betty smiled. Then she turned to the man who had made the offer. "Dave, will you do something for me?"

"Why, yes, Betty—if it's not to go and wash up cups down there," he replied at once, with a grin.

"No, it isn't to wash cups. It's"—she glanced quickly at Jim, who was watching her with anything but a lover-like stare—"it's—to withdraw that offer."

Dave removed his pipe and turned to Jim.

"That ranch business is off," he said.

Then he suddenly sat up and leant toward the younger man.

"Jim, boy, you know I wish you well," he said. "I wish you so well that I understand and appreciate Betty's decision now, though I allow I didn't see it at first. She's right. Parson Tom is right. I was wrong. Get right out into the world and make her a home. Get right out and show her, and the rest of us, the stuff you're made of. You won't fail if you put your back into it. And when you come back it'll be a great day for you both. And see here, boy, so long as you run straight you can ask me anything in the name of friendship, and I'll not fail you. Here's my hand on it."

Something of Dave's earnestness rather than the girl's quiet strength seemed to suddenly catch hold of and lift the dejected man out of his moodiness. His face cleared and his

sunny smile broke out again. He gripped the great hand, and enthusiasm rang in his voice.

"By God, you're right, Dave," he cried. "You're a good chap. Yes, I'll go. Betty," he turned to the girl, "I'll go to the Yukon, where there's gold for the seeking. I'll realize all the money I can. I won't part with my mill. That will be my fall-back if I fail. But I won't fail. I'll make money by—no, I'll make money. And——" Suddenly, at the height of his enthusiasm, his face fell, and the buoyant spirit dropped from him.

"Yes, yes," broke in Betty, anxious to see his mood last.

Jim thought for a moment while the clouds gathered on his face. Then he looked steadily at Dave.

"Dave," he said, and paused. Then he began again. "Dave—in friendship's name—I'll ask you something now. Betty here," he swallowed, as though what he had to say was very difficult. "You see, I may be away a long time, you can never tell. Will you—will you take care of her for me? Will you be her—her guardian, as you have always been mine? I know I'm asking a lot, but somehow I can't leave her here, and—I know there's her uncle and aunt. But, I don't know, somehow I'd like to think you had given me your word that she would be all right, that you were looking after her for me. Will you?"

His face and tone were both eager, and full of real feeling. Dave never flinched as he listened to the request, yet every word cut into his heart, lashed him till he wondered how it was Jim could not see and understand. He moistened his lips. He groped in his pocket for his matches and lit one. He let it burn out, watching it until the flame

nearly reached his fingers. Then he knocked his pipe out on his boot, and broke it with the force he used. Finally he looked up with a smile, and his eyes encountered Betty's.

She smiled back, and he turned to her lover, who was waiting for his answer.

"Sure I'll look after her—for you," he said slowly.

Jim sprang to his feet.

"I can never thank——"

But Dave cut him short.

"Don't thank me, boy," he said, preparing to return to the camp. "Just—get out and do." And he left the lovers to return at their leisure.

## **CHAPTER III**

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### **AFFAIRS IN MALKERN**

Four glowing summers have gone; a fifth is dawning, driving before its radiant splendor the dark shadows and gray monotony of winter's icy pall. Malkern is a busy little town, spreading out its feelers in the way of small houses dotted about amidst the park land of the valley. Every year sees a further and further extension of its boarded sidewalks and grass-edged roadways; every year sees its population steadily increasing; every year sees an advancement in the architecture of its residences, and some detail displaying additional prosperity in its residents.