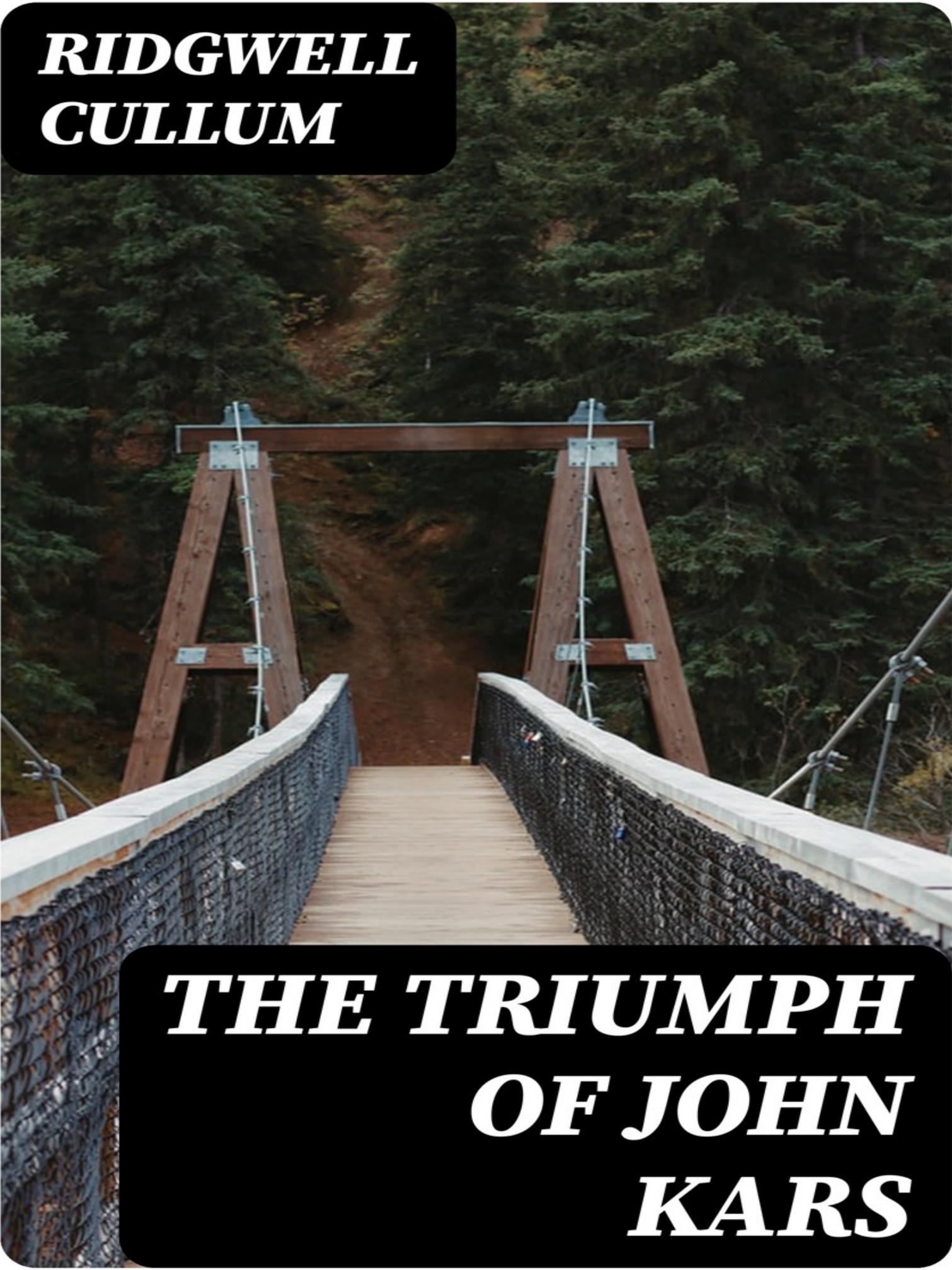


***RIDGWELL
CULLUM***

A wooden suspension bridge with a metal mesh railing, set against a backdrop of dense green forest. The bridge is made of light-colored wood and has a dark metal mesh railing. It is supported by two large wooden A-frame towers. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees.

***THE TRIUMPH
OF JOHN
KARS***

Ridgwell Cullum

The Triumph of John Kars

A Story of the Yukon

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

AT FORT MOWBRAY

CHAPTER II

THE MISSION OF ST. AGATHA

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER

CHAPTER IV

ON BELL RIVER

CHAPTER V

IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER VI

JOHN KARS

CHAPTER VII

AT SNAKE RIVER LANDING

CHAPTER VIII

TWO MEN OF THE NORTH

CHAPTER IX

MURRAY TELLS HIS STORY

CHAPTER X

THE MAN WITH THE SCAR

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET OF THE GORGE

CHAPTER XII

DR. BILL DISPENSES AID AND ARGUMENT

CHAPTER XIII

THE FALL TRADE

CHAPTER XIV

ARRIVALS IN THE NIGHT

CHAPTER XV

FATHER JOSE PROBES

CHAPTER XVI

A MAN AND A MAID

CHAPTER XVII

A NIGHT IN LEAPING HORSE

CHAPTER XVIII

ON THE NORTHERN SEAS

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE GRIDIRON

CHAPTER XX

THE "ONLOOKERS" AGAIN

CHAPTER XXI

DR. BILL INVESTIGATES

CHAPTER XXII

IN THE SPRINGTIME

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DARKNESS BEFORE DAWN

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIRST STREAK OF DAWN

CHAPTER XXV

THE OUT-WORLD

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DEPUTATION

CHAPTER XXVII

THE BATTLE OF BELL RIVER

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE HARVEST OF BATTLE

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LAP OF THE GODS

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE TERROR

CHAPTER XXXI

THE CLOSE OF THE LONG TRAIL

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SUMMER OF LIFE

CHAPTER I

AT FORT MOWBRAY

[Table of Contents](#)

Murray McTavish was seated at a small table, green-baized, littered with account-books and a profusion of papers. But he was not regarding these things. Instead, his dark, intelligent eyes were raised to the smallish, dingy window in front of him, set in its deep casing of centuries-old logs. Nor was the warm light shining in his eyes inspired by the sufficiently welcome sunlight beyond. His gaze was entirely absorbed by a fur-clad figure, standing motionless in the open jaws of the gateway of the heavily timbered stockade outside.

It was the figure of a young woman. A long coat of beaver skin, and a cap of the same fur pressed down low over her ruddy brown hair, held her safe from the bitter chill of the late semi-arctic fall. She, too, was absorbed in the scene upon which she was gazing.

Her soft eyes, so gray and gentle, searched the distance. The hills, snow-capped and serrated. The vast incline of ancient glacier, rolling backwards and upwards in discolored waves from the precipitate opposite bank of Snake River. The woods, so darkly overpowering as the year progressed towards its old age. The shaking tundra, treacherous and hideous with rank growths of the summer. The river facets of broken crags awaiting the cloak of winter to conceal their crude nakedness. Then the trail, so slight, so faint. The work of sleds and moccasined feet through centuries of native

traffic, with the occasional variation of the hard shod feet of the white adventurer.

She knew it all by heart. She read it all with the eyes of one who has known no other outlook since first she opened them upon the world. Yes, she knew it all. But that which she did not know she was seeking now. Beyond all things, at that moment, she desired to penetrate some of the secrets that lay beyond her grim horizon.

Her brows were drawn in a slight frown. The questions she was asking peeped out of the depths of her searching eyes. And they were the questions of a troubled mind.

A step sounded behind her, but she did not turn. A moment later the voice of Murray McTavish challenged her.

"Why?"

The brief demand was gentle enough, yet it contained a sort of playful irony, which, at the moment, Jessie Mowbray resented. She turned. There was impatience in the eyes which confronted him. She regarded him steadily.

"Why? It's always *why*—with you, when feelings get the better of me. Maybe you never feel dread, or doubt, or worry. Maybe you never feel anything—human. Say, you're a man and strong. I'm just a woman, and—and he's my father. He's overdue by six weeks. He's not back yet, and we've had no word from him all summer."

Her impatience became swallowed up by her anxiety again. The appeal of her manner, her beauty were not lost upon the man.

"So you stand around looking at the trail he needs to come over, setting up a fever of trouble for yourself

figgering on the traps and things nature's laid out for us folk beyond those hills. Guess that's a woman sure."

Hot, impatient words rose to the girl's lips, but she choked them back.

"I can't argue it," she cried, a little desperately. "Father should have been back six weeks ago. You know that. He isn't back. Well?"

"Allan and I have run this old post ten years," Murray said soberly. "In those ten years there's not been a single time that Allan's hit the northern trail on a trade when he's got back to time by many weeks—generally more than six. It don't seem to me I've seen his little girl standing around same as she's doing now—ever before."

The girl drew her collar up about her neck. The gesture was a mere desire for movement.

"I guess I've never felt as I do now," she said miserably.

"How?"

The girl's words came in a sudden passionate rush.

"Oh, it's no use!" she cried. "You wouldn't understand. You're a good partner. You're a big man on the trail. Guess there's no bigger men on the trail than you and father—unless it's John Kars. But you all fight with hard muscle. You figure out the sums as you see them. You don't act as women do when they don't know. I've got it all here," she added, pressing her fur mittened hands over her bosom, her face flushed and her eyes shining with emotion. "I know, I feel there's something amiss. I've never felt this way before. Where is he? Where did he go this time? He never tells us. You never tell us. We don't know. Can't help be sent? Can't I go with an outfit and search for him?"

The man's smile had died out. His big eyes, strange, big dark eyes, avoided the girl's. They turned towards the desolate, sunlit horizon. His reply was delayed as though he were seeking what best to say.

The girl waited with what patience she could summon. She was born and bred to the life of this fierce northern world, where women look to their men for guidance, where they are forced to rely upon man's strength for life itself.

She gazed upon the round profile, awaiting that final word which she felt must be given. Murray McTavish was part of the life she lived on the bitter heights of the Yukon territory. In her mind he was a fixture of the fort which years since had been given her father's name. He was a young man, a shade on the better side of thirty-five, but he possessed none of the features associated with the men of the trail. His roundness was remarkable, and emphasized by his limited stature. His figure was the figure of a middle-aged merchant who has spent his life in the armchair of a city office. His neck was short and fat. His face was round and full. The only feature he possessed which lifted him out of the ruck of the ordinary was his eyes. These were unusual enough. There was their great size, and a subtle glowing fire always to be discovered in the large dark pupils. They gave the man a suggestion of tremendous passionate impulse. One look at them and the insignificant, the commonplace bodily form was forgotten. An impression of flaming energy supervened. The man's capacity for effort, physical or mental, for emotion, remained undoubted.

But Jessie Mowbray was too accustomed to the man to dwell on these things, to notice them. His easy, smiling,

good-natured manner was the man known to the inhabitants of Fort Mowbray, and the Mission of St. Agatha on the Snake River.

The man's reply came at last. It came seriously, earnestly.

"I can't guess how this notion's got into you, Jessie," he said, his eyes still dwelling on the broken horizon. "Allan's the hardest man in the north—not even excepting John Kars, who's got you women-folk mesmerized. Allan's been traipsing this land since two years before you were born, and that is more than twenty years ago. There's not a hill, or valley, or river he don't know like a school kid knows its alphabet. Not an inch of this devil's playground for nigh a range of three hundred miles. There isn't a trouble on the trail he's not been up against, and beat every time. And now—why, now he's got a right outfit with him, same as always, you're worrying. Say, there's only one thing I can figger to beat Allan Mowbray on the trail. It would need to be Indians, and a biggish outfit of them. Even then I'd bet my last nickel on him." He shook his head with decision. "No, I guess he'll be right along when his work's through."

"And his work?"

The girl's tone was one of relief. Murray's confidence was infectious in spite of her instinctive fears.

The man shrugged his fleshy shoulders under his fur-lined pea-jacket.

"Trade, I guess. We're not here for health. Allan don't fight the gods of the wilderness or the legion of elemental devils who run this desert for the play of it. No, this country breeds just one race. First and last we're wage slaves.

Maybe we're more wage slaves north of 60 degrees than any dull-witted toiler taking his wage by the hour, and spending it at the end of each week. We're slaves of the big money, and every man, and many of the women, who cross 60 degrees are ready to stake their souls as well as bodies, if they haven't already done so, for the yellow dust that's to buy the physic they'll need to keep their bodies alive later when they've turned their backs on a climate that was never built for white men."

Then the seriousness passed for smiling good-nature. It was the look his round face was made for. It was the manner the girl was accustomed to.

"Guess this country's a pretty queer book to read," he went on. "And there aren't any pictures to it, either. Most of us living up here have opened its covers, and some of us have read. But I guess Allan's read deeper than any of us. I'd say he's read deeper even than John Kars. It's for that reason I sold my interests in Seattle an' joined him ten years ago in the enterprise he'd set up here. It's been tough, but it's sure been worth it," he observed reflectively. "Yep. Sure it has." He sighed in a satisfied way. Then his smile deepened, and the light in his eyes glowed with something like enthusiasm. "Think of it. You can trade right here just how you darn please. You can make your own laws, and abide by 'em or break 'em just as you get the notion. Think of it, we're five hundred miles, five hundred miles of fierce weather, and the devil's own country, from the coast. We're three hundred miles from the nearest law of civilization. And, as for newspapers and the lawmakers, they're fifteen hundred miles of tempest and every known elemental

barrier away. We're kings in our own country—if we got the nerve. And we don't need to care a whoop so the play goes on. Can you beat it? No. And Allan knows it all—all. He's the only man who does—for all your John Kars. I'm glad. Say, Jessie, it's dead easy to face anything if you feel—just glad."

As he finished speaking the eyes which had held the girl were turned towards the gray shadows eastward. He was gazing out towards that far distant region of the Mackenzie River which flowed northwards to empty itself into the ice-bound Arctic Ocean. But he was not thinking of the river.

Jessie was relieved at her escape from his masterful gaze. But she was glad of his confidence and unquestioned strength. It helped her when she needed help, and some of her shadows had been dispelled.

"I s'pose it's as you say," she returned without enthusiasm. "If my daddy's safe that's all I care. Mother's good. I just love her. And—Alec, he's a good boy. I love my mother and my brother. But neither of them could ever replace my daddy. Yes, I'll be glad for him to get back. Oh, so glad. When—when d'you think that'll be?"

"When his work's through."

"I must be patient. Say, I wish I'd got nerve."

The man laughed pleasantly.

"Guess what a girl needs is for her men-folk to have nerve," he said. "I don't know 'bout your brother Alec, but your father—well, he's got it all."

The girl's eyes lit.

"Yes," she said simply. Then, with a glance westwards at the dying daylight, she went on: "We best get down to the Mission. Supper'll be waiting."

Murray nodded.

"Sure. We'll get right along."

CHAPTER II

THE MISSION OF ST. AGATHA

Table of Contents

A haunting silence prevails in the land beyond the barrier of the Yukon watershed. It is a world apart, beyond, and the other land, the land where the battle of civilization still fluctuates, still sways under the violent passions of men, remains outside.

Its fascination is beyond all explanation. Yet it is as great as its conditions are merciless. Murray McTavish had sought the explanation, and found it in the fact that it was a land in which man could make his own laws and break them at his pleasure. Was this really its fascination? Hardly. The explanation must surely lie in something deeper. Surely the primitive in man, which no civilization can out-breed, would be the better answer.

In Allan Mowbray's case this was definitely so. Murray McTavish had served his full apprenticeship where the laws of civilization prevail. His judgment could scarcely be accepted in a land where only the strong may survive.

The difference between the two men was as wide as the countries which had bred them, and furthermore Allan had survived on the banks of the Snake River for upwards of twenty-five years. For twenty-five years he had lived the only life that appealed to his primitive instincts and powers. And before that he had never so much as peeped beyond the watershed at the world outside. His whole life was instinct with courage. His years had been years of struggle

and happiness, years in which a loyal and devoted wife had shared his every disappointment and success, years in which he had watched his son and daughter grow to the ripeness of full youth.

The whole life of these people was a simple enough story of passionate energy, and a slow, steady-growing prosperity, built out of a wilderness where a moment's weakness would have yielded them complete disaster. But they were merciless upon their own powers. They knew the stake, and played for all. The man played for the tiny lives which had come to cheer his resting moments, and the defenceless woman who had borne them. The woman supported him with a loyal devotion and courage that was invincible.

For years Allan Mowbray had scoured the country in search of his trade. His outfit was known to every remote Indian race, east and west, and north—always north. His was a figure that haunted the virgin woodlands, the broad rivers, the unspeakable wastes of silence at all times and seasons. Even the world outside found an echo of his labors.

These two had fought their battle unaided from the grim shelter of Fort Mowbray. And, in the clearing of St. Agatha's Mission, at the foot of the bald knoll, upon the summit of which the old Fort stood, their infrequent moments of leisure were spent in the staunch log hut which the man had erected for the better comfort of his young children.

Then had come the greater prosperity. It was the time of a prosperity upon which the simple-minded fur-hunter had never counted. The Fort became a store for trade. It was no longer a mere headquarters where furs were made ready for

the market. Trade developed. Real trade. And Allan was forced to change his methods. The work was no longer possible single-handed. The claims of the trail suddenly increased, and both husband and wife saw that their prospects had entirely outgrown their calculations.

Forthwith long council was taken between them. Either the trail, with its possibilities, which had suddenly become an enormous factor in their lives, or the store at the Fort, which was almost equally important, must be abandoned, or a partner must be found and taken. Allan Mowbray was not the man to yield a detail of the harvest he had so laboriously striven for. So decision fell upon the latter course.

Murray McTavish was not twenty-five when he arrived at the Fort. He was a man of definite personality and was consumed with an abundance of determination and resource. His inclination to stoutness was even then pronounced. But above all stood out his profound, concentrated understanding of American commercial methods, and the definite, almost fixed smile of his deeply shining eyes.

There was never a doubt of the wisdom of Allan's choice from the moment of his arrival. Murray plunged himself unreservedly into the work of the enterprise, searching its possibilities with a keenly businesslike eye, and he saw that they had been by no means overestimated by his partner. There was no delay. With methods of smiling "hustle" he took charge of the work at the Fort, and promptly released the overburdened Allan for the important work of the trail.

Nor was Ailsa Mowbray the least affected by the new partner's coming. It was early made clear that her years of labor were at last to yield her that leisure she craved for the upbringing of her little family, which was, even now, receiving education under the cultured guidance of the little French-Canadian priest who had set up his Mission in this wide wilderness. For the first time in all her married life she found herself free to indulge in the delights of a domesticity her woman's heart desired.

It was about the end of the summer, after Murray's coming to the Fort, that an element of trouble began to disquiet the peace of the Mission on Snake River. It almost seemed as if the change from the old conditions had broken the spell of the years of calm which had prevailed. Yet the trouble was remote enough. Furthermore it seemed natural enough.

First came rumor. It traveled the vast, silent places in that mysterious fashion which never seems clearly accounted for. Well over a hundred and fifty miles of mountain, and valley, and trackless woodlands separated the Fort from the great Mackenzie River, yet, on the wings of the wind, it seemed, was borne a story of war, of massacre, of savage destruction. The hitherto peaceful fishing Indians of Bell River had suddenly become the hooligans of the north. They were carrying fire and slaughter to all lesser Indian settlements within a radius of a hundred miles of their own sombre valley.

The Fort was disturbed. The whole Mission struck a note of panic. Father José saw grave danger for his small flock of Indian converts. He remembered the white woman and her

children, too. He was seriously alarmed. Allan was away, so he sought the advice of those remaining. Murray was untried in the conditions of the life of the country, but Ailsa Mowbray possessed all the little man's confidence.

In the end, however, it was Murray who decided. He took upon himself the position of leader in his partner's absence, and claimed the right to probe the trouble to its depths. The priest and Ailsa yielded reluctantly. They, at least, understood the risk of his inexperience. But Murray forcefully rejected any denial, and, with characteristic energy, and no little skill, he gathered an outfit together and promptly set out for Bell River.

It was the one effort needed to assure him of his permanent place in the life of the Fort on Snake River. It left him no longer an untried recruit, but a soldier in the battle of the wilderness.

A month later he returned from his perilous enterprise with his work well and truly done. The information he brought was comprehensive and not without comfort. The Bell River Indians had certainly taken to the war-path. But it was only in defence of their fishing on the river which meant their whole existence. They were defending it successfully, but, in their success, their savage instincts had run amuck. Not content with slaying the invaders they had annexed their enemy's property and squaws. Then, with characteristic ruthlessness, they had set about carrying war far and near, but only amongst the Indians. Their efforts undoubtedly had a dual purpose, The primary object was the satisfying of a war lust suddenly stirred into being in savage hearts by their first successes. The other was purely

politic. They meant to establish a terror, and so safeguard their food supplies for all time.

Murray's story was complete. It was thorough. It had not been easy. His capacity henceforth became beyond all question.

So the cloud passed for the moment. But it did not disappear. The people at the Fort, even Allan Mowbray, himself, when he returned, dismissed the matter without further consideration. He laughed at the panic which had arisen in his absence, while yet he commended Murray's initiative and courage.

After the first lull, however, fresh stories percolated through. They reached the Fort again and again, at varying intervals, until the Bell River Valley became a black, dangerous spot in the minds of all people, and both Indians, and any chance white adventurer, who sought shelter at the Fort, received due warning to avoid this newly infected plague spot.

It was nearly ten years since these things had occurred. And during all that time the primitive life on the banks of Snake River had continued to progress in its normal calm. Each year brought its added prosperity, which found little enough outward display beyond the constant bettering of trade conditions which went on under Murray's busy hands. A certain added comfort reached the mother's home in the Mission clearing. But otherwise the outward and visible signs of the wealth that was being stored up were none.

Father José's Mission grew in extent. The clearing widened and the numbers of savage converts increased definitely. The charity and medical skill of the little priest,

and the Mission's adjacency to a big trading post, were responsible for drawing about the place every begging Indian and the whole of his belongings. The old man received them, and his benefits were placed at their service; the only return he demanded was an attendance at his religious services, and that the children should be sent to the classes which he held in the Mission House. It was a pastoral that held every element of beauty, but as an anachronism in the fierce setting north of "sixty" it was even more perfect.

Allan Mowbray looked on at all these things in his brief enough leisure. Nor was he insensible to the changed conditions of comfort in his own home, due to the persistent genius of his partner. The old, rough furnishings had gone to be replaced by modern stuff, which must have demanded a stupendous effort in haulage from the gold city of Leaping Horse, nearly three hundred miles distant. But Ailsa was pleased. That was his great concern. Ailsa was living the life he had always desired for her, and he was free to roam the wilderness at his will. He blessed the day that had brought Murray McTavish into the enterprise.

Just now Allan had been away from the Fort nearly the whole of the open season. His return was awaited by all. These journeys of his brought, as a result, a rush of business to the Fort, and an added life to the Mission. Then there was the mother, and her now grown children, waiting to welcome the man who was their all.

But Allan Mowbray had not yet returned, and Jessie, young, impulsive, devoted, was living in a fever of

apprehension such as her experienced mother never displayed.

Supper was ready at the house when Murray and Jessie arrived from the Fort. Ailsa Mowbray was awaiting them. She regarded them smilingly as they came. Her eyes, twins, in their beauty and coloring, with her daughter's, were full of that quiet patience which years of struggle had inspired. For all she was approaching fifty, she was a handsome, erect woman, taller than the average, with a figure of physical strength quite unimpaired by the hard wear of that bitter northern world. Her greeting was the greeting of a mother, whose chief concern is the bodily welfare of her children, and a due regard for her domestic arrangements.

"Jessie's young yet, and maybe that accounts for a heap. But you, Murray, being a man, ought to know when it's food time. I guess it's been waiting a half hour. Come right in, and we'll get on without waiting for Alec. The boy went out with his gun, an' I don't think we'll see him till he's ready."

Jessie's serious eyes had caught her mother's attention. Ailsa Mowbray possessed all a mother's instinct. Her watch over her pretty daughter, though unobtrusive, was never for a moment relaxed. Some day she supposed the child would have to marry. Well, the choice was small enough. It scarcely seemed a thing to concern herself with. But she did. And her feelings and opinions were very decided.

Murray smilingly accepted the blame for their tardiness.

"Guess it's up to me," he said. "You see, Jessie was good enough to let me yarn about the delights of this slice of God's country. Well, when a feller gets handing out his talk that way to a bright girl, who doesn't find she's got a

previous engagement elsewhere, he's liable to forget such ordinary things as mere food."

Mrs. Mowbray nodded.

"That's the way of it—sure. Specially when you haven't cooked it," she said, with a smile that robbed her words of all reproach.

She turned to pass within the rambling, log-built house. But at that moment two dogs raced round the angle of the building and fawned up to her, completely ignoring the others.

"Guess Alec's—ready," was Murray's smiling comment.

There was a shadow of irony in the man's words, which made the mother glance up quickly from the dogs she was impartially caressing.

"Yes," she said simply, and without warmth. Her regard though momentary was very direct.

Murray turned away as the sound of voices followed in the wake of the dogs.

"Hello!" he cried, in a startled fashion. "Here's Father José, and—Keewin!"

"Keewin?"

It was Jessie who echoed the name. But her mother had ceased caressing the dogs. She stood very erect, and quite silent.

Three men turned the corner of the house. Alec came first. He was tall, a fair edition of his mother, but without any of the strength of character so plainly written on her handsome features. Only just behind him came Father José and an Indian.

The Padre of the Mission was a white-haired, white-browed man of many years and few enough inches. His weather-stained face, creased like parchment, was lit by a pair of piercing eyes, which were full of fire and mental energy. But, for the moment, no one had eyes for anything but the stoic placidity of the expressionless features of the Indian. The man's forehead was bound with a blood-stained bandage of dirty cloth.

Ailsa Mowbray's gentle eyes widened. Her firm lips perceptibly tightened. Direct as a shot came her inquiry.

"What's amiss?" she demanded.

She was addressing the white man, but her eyes were steadily regarding the Indian.

A moment later a second inquiry came.

"Why is Keewin here? Why is he wounded?"

The Padre replied. It was characteristic of the country in which they lived, the lives they lived, that he resorted to no subterfuge, although he knew his tidings were bad.

"Keewin's got through from Bell River. It's a letter to you from—Allan."

The woman had perfect command of herself. She paled slightly, but her lips were even firmer set. Jessie hurried to her side. It was as though the child had instinctively sought the mother's support in face of a blow which she knew was about to fall.

Ailsa held out one hand.

"Give it to me," she said authoritatively. Then, as the Padre handed the letter across to her, she added: "But first tell me what's amiss with him."

The Padre cleared his throat.

"He's held up," he said firmly. "The Bell River neches have got him surrounded. Keewin got through with great difficulty, and has been wounded. You best read the letter, and—tell us."

CHAPTER III

THE LETTER

Table of Contents

Ailsa Mowbray tore off the fastening which secured the outer cover of discolored buckskin. Inside was a small sheet of folded paper. She opened it, and glanced at the handwriting. Then, without a word, she turned back into the house. Jessie followed her mother. It was nature asserting itself. Danger was in the air, and the sex instinct at once became uppermost.

The men were left alone.

Murray turned on the Indian. Father José and Alec Mowbray waited attentively.

"Tell me," Murray commanded. "Tell me quickly—while the missis and the other are gone. They got his words. You tell me yours."

His words came sharply. Keewin was Allan Mowbray's most trusted scout.

The man answered at once, in a rapid flow of broken English. His one thought was succor for his great white boss.

"Him trade," he began, adopting his own method of narrating events, which Murray was far too wise in his understanding of Indians to attempt to change. "Great boss. Him much trade. Big. Plenty. So we come by Bell River. One week, two week, three week, by Bell River." He counted off the weeks on his fingers. "Bimeby Indian—him come plenty. No pow-wow. Him come by night. All around corrals. Him make big play. Him shoot plenty. Dead—dead—dead. Much

dead." He pointed at the ground in many directions to indicate the fierceness of the attack. "Boss Allan—him big chief. Plenty big. Him say us fight plenty—too. Him say, him show 'em dis Indian. So him fight big. Him kill heap plenty too. So—one week. More Indian come. Boss Allan then call Keewin. Us make big pow-wow. Him say ten Indian kill. Good Indian. Ten still fight. Not 'nuff. No good ten fight whole tribe. Him get help, or all kill. So. Him call Star-man. Keewin say Star-man plenty good Indian. Him send Star-man to fort. So. No help come. Maybe Star-man him get kill. So him pow-wow. Keewin say, him go fetch help. Keewin go, not all be kill. So Keewin go. Indian find Keewin. They shoot plenty much. Keewin no care that," he flicked his tawny fingers in the air. "Indian no good shoot. Keewin laugh. So. Keewin come fort."

The man ceased speaking, his attitude remaining precisely as it was before he began. He was without a sign of emotion. Neither the Padre nor Alec spoke. Both were waiting for Murray. The priest's eyes were on the trader's stern round face. He was watching and reading with profound insight. Alec continued to regard the Indian. But he chafed under Murray's delay.

Before the silence was broken Ailsa Mowbray reappeared in the doorway. Jessie had remained behind.

The wife's face was a study in strong courage battling with emotion. Her gray eyes, no longer soft, were steady, however. Her brows were markedly drawn. Her lips, too, were firm, heroically firm.

She held out her letter to the Padre. It was noticeable she did not offer it to Murray.

"Read it," she said. Then she added: "You can all read it. Alec, too."

The two men closed in on either side of Father José. The woman looked on while the three pairs of eyes read the firm clear handwriting.

"Well?" she demanded, as the men looked up from their reading, and the priest thoughtfully refolded the paper.

Alec's tongue was the more ready to express his thoughts.

"God!" he cried. "It means—massacre!"

The priest turned on him in reproof. His keen eyes shone like burnished steel.

"Keep silent—you," he cried, in a sharp, staccato way.

The hot blood mounted to the boy's cheek, whether in abashment or in anger would be impossible to say. He was prevented from further word by Murray McTavish who promptly took command.

"Say, there's no time for talk," he said, in his decisive fashion. "It's up to us to get busy right away." He turned to the priest. "Father, I need two crews for the big canoes right off—now. You'll get 'em. Good crews for the paddle. Best let Keewin pick 'em. Eh, Keewin?" The Indian nodded. "Keewin'll take charge of one, and I the other. I can make Bell River under the week. I'll drive the crews to the limit, an' maybe make the place in four days. I'll get right back to the store now for the arms and ammunition, and the grub. We start in an hour's time."

Then he turned on Alec. There was no question in his mind. He had made his decisions clearly and promptly.

"See, boy," he said. "You'll stay right here. I'm aware you don't fancy the store. But fer once you'll need to run it. But more than all you'll be responsible nothing goes amiss for the women-folk. Their care is up to you, in your father's absence. Get me? Father José'll help you all he knows."

Then, without awaiting reply, he turned to Allan Mowbray's wife. His tone changed to one of the deepest gravity.

"Ma'am," he said, "whatever man can do to help your husband now, I'll do. I'll spare no one in the effort. Certainly not myself. That's my word."

The wife's reply came in a voice that was no longer steady.

"Thank you, Murray—for myself and for Allan. God—bless you."

Murray had turned already to return to the Fort when Alec suddenly burst out in protest. His eyes lit—the eyes of his mother. His fresh young face was scarlet to the brow.

"And do you suppose I'm going to sit around while father's being done to death by a lot of rotten Indians? Not on your life. See here, Murray, if there's any one needed to hang around the store it's up to you. Father José can look after mother and Jessie. My place is with the outfit, and—I'm going with it. Besides, who are you to dictate what I'm to do? You look after your business; I'll see to mine. You get me? I'm going up there to Bell River. I——"

"You'll—stop—right—here!"

Murray had turned in a flash, and in his voice was a note none of those looking on had ever heard before. It was a revelation of the man, and even Father José was startled.

The clash was sudden. Both the mother and the priest realized for the first time in ten years the antagonism underlying this outward display.

The mother had no understanding of it. The priest perhaps had some. He knew Murray's energy and purpose. He knew that Alec had been indulged to excess by his parents. It would have seemed impossible in the midst of the stern life in which they all lived that the son of such parents could have grown up other than in their image. But it was not so, and no one knew it better than Father José, who had been responsible for his education.

Alec was weak, reckless. Of his physical courage there was no question. He had inherited his father's and his mother's to the full. But he lacked their every other balance. He was idle, he loathed the store and all belonging to it. He detested the life he was forced to live in this desolate world, and craved, as only weak, virile youth can crave, for the life and pleasure of the civilization he had read of, heard of, dreamed of.

Murray followed up his words before the younger man could gather his retort.

"When your father's in danger there's just one service you can do him," he went on, endeavoring to check his inclination to hot words. "If there's a thing happens to you, and we can't help your father, why, I guess your mother and sister are left without a hand to help 'em. Do you get that? I'm thinking for Allan Mowbray the best I know. I can run this outfit to the limit. I can do what any other man can do for his help. Your place is your father's place—right here. Ask your mother."

Murray looked across at Mrs. Mowbray, still standing in her doorway, and her prompt support was forthcoming.

"Yes," she said, and her eyes sought those of her spoiled son. "For my sake, Alec, for your father's, for your sister's."

Ailsa Mowbray was pleading where she had the right to command. And to himself Father José mildly anathematized the necessity.

Alec turned away with a scarcely smothered imprecation. But his mother's appeal had had the effect Murray had desired. Therefore he came to the boy's side in the friendliest fashion, his smile once more restored to the features so made for smiling.

"Say, Alec," he cried, "will you bear a hand with the arms and stuff? I need to get right away quick."

And strangely enough the young man choked back his disappointment, and the memory of the trader's overbearing manner. He acquiesced without further demur. But then this spoilt boy was only spoiled and weak. His temper was hot, volcanic. His reckless disposition was the outcome of a generous, unthinking courage. In his heart the one thing that mattered was his father's peril, and the sadness in his mother's eyes. Then he had read that letter.

"Yes," he said. "Tell me, and I'll do all you need. But for God's sake don't treat me like a silly kid."

"It was you who treated yourself as one," put in Father José, before Murray could reply. "Remember, my son, men don't put women-folk into the care of 'silly kids.'"

It was characteristic of Murray McTavish that the loaded canoes cast off from the Mission landing at the appointed