

Northern Lights, v5

Gilbert Parker

Table of Contents

<u>Northern Lights, v5</u>	1
<u>Gilbert Parker</u>	1
<u>THE ERROR OF THE DAY</u>	1
<u>THE WHISPERER</u>	11
<u>AS DEEP AS THE SEA</u>	21

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- THE ERROR OF THE DAY
- THE WHISPERER
- AS DEEP AS THE SEA

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THE ERROR OF THE DAY

The "Error of the Day" may be defined as "The difference between the distance or range which must be put upon the sights in order to hit the target and the actual distance from the gun to the target." Admiralty Note.

A great naval gun never fires twice alike. It varies from day to day, and expert allowance has to be made in sighting every time it is fired. Variations in atmosphere, condition of ammunition, and the wear of the gun are the contributory causes to the ever-varying "Error of the Day."

.....

"Say, ain't he pretty?"

"A Jim-dandy-oh, my!"

"What's his price in the open market?"

"Thirty millions-I think not."

Then was heard the voice of Billy Goat his name was William Goatry

"Out in the cold world, out in the street;
Nothing to wear, and nothing to eat,
Fatherless, motherless, sadly I roam,
Child of misfortune, I'm driven from home."

A loud laugh followed, for Billy Goat was a popular person at Kowatin in the Saskatchewan country. He had an inimitable drollery, heightened by a cast in his eye, a very large mouth, and a round, good-humoured face; also he had a hand and arm like iron, and was altogether a great man on a "spree."

There had been a two days' spree at Kowatin, for no other reason than that there had been great excitement over the capture and the subsequent escape of a prairie-rover, who had robbed the contractor's money-chest at the rail-head on the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Forty miles from Kowatin he had been caught by, and escaped from, the tall, brown-eyed man with the hard-bitten face who leaned against the open window of the tavern, looking

indifferently at the jeering crowd before him. For a police officer he was not unpopular with them, but he had been a failure for once, and, as Billy Goat had said: "It tickled us to death to see a rider of the plains off his trolley on the cold, cold ground, same as you and me."

They did not undervalue him. If he had been less a man than he was, they would not have taken the trouble to cover him with their drunken ribaldry. He had scored off them in the past in just such sprees as this, when he had the power to do so, and used the power good-naturedly and quietly but used it.

Then, he was Sergeant Foyle of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, on duty in a district as large as the United Kingdom. And he had no greater admirer than Billy Goat, who now reviled him. Not without cause, in a way, for he had reviled himself to this extent, that when the prairie-rover, Halbeck, escaped on the way to Prince Albert, after six months' hunt for him and a final capture in the Kowatin district, Foyle resigned the Force before the Commissioner could reproach him or call him to account. Usually so exact, so certain of his target, some care had not been taken, he had miscalculated, and there had been the Error of the Day. Whatever it was, it had seemed to him fatal; and he had turned his face from the barrack yard.

Then he had made his way to the Happy Land Hotel at Kowatin, to begin life as "a free and independent gent on the loose," as Billy Goat had said. To resign had seemed extreme; because, though the Commissioner was vexed at Halbeck's escape, Foyle was the best non-commissioned officer in the Force. He had frightened horse thieves and bogus land-agents and speculators out of the country; had fearlessly tracked down a criminal or a band of criminals when the odds were heavy against him. He carried on his cheek the scars of two bullets, and there was one white lock in his brown hair, where an arrow had torn the scalp away as, alone, he drove into the Post a score of Indians, fresh from raiding the cattle of an immigrant trailing north.

Now he was out of work, or so it seemed; he had stepped down from his scarlet-coated dignity, from the place of guardian and guide of civilisation, into the idleness of a tavern stoop.

As the little group swayed round him, and Billy Goat started another song, Foyle roused himself as though to move away he was waiting for the mail-stage to take him south:

"Oh, father, dear father, come home with me now,
The clock in the steeple strikes one;
You said you were coming right home from the shop
As soon as your day's work was done.
Come home come home "

The song arrested him, and he leaned back against the window again. A curious look came into his eyes, a look that had nothing to do with the acts of the people before him. It was searching into a scene beyond this bright sunlight and the far green-brown grass, and the little oasis of trees in the distance marking a homestead and the dust of the wagon-wheels, out on the trail beyond the grain-elevator-beyond the blue horizon's rim, quivering in the heat, and into regions where this crisp, clear, life-giving, life-saving air never blew.

"You said you were coming right home from the shop
As soon as your day's work was done.
Come home come home "

He remembered when he had first heard this song in a play called 'Ten Nights in a Bar-room', many years before, and how it had wrenched his heart and soul, and covered him with a sudden cloud of shame and anger. For his father had been a drunkard, and his brother had grown up a drunkard, that brother whom he had not seen for ten years until until

Northern Lights, v5

He shuddered, closed his eyes, as though to shut out something that the mind saw. He had had a rough life, he had become inured to the seamy side of things there was a seamy side even in this clean, free, wide land; and he had no sentimentality; though something seemed to hurt and shame him now.

"As soon as your day's work was done.
Come home come home "

The crowd was uproarious. The exhilaration had become a kind of delirium. Men were losing their heads; there was an element of irresponsibility in the new outbreak likely to breed some violent act, which every man of them would lament when sober again.

Nettlewood Foyle watched the dust rising from the wheels of the stage, which had passed the elevator and was nearing the Prairie Home Hotel far down the street. He would soon leave behind him this noisy ribaldry of which he was the centre. He tossed his cheroot away. Suddenly he heard a low voice behind him.

"Why don't you hit out, sergeant?" it said.

He started almost violently, and turned round. Then his face flushed, his eyes blurred with feeling and deep surprise, and his lips parted in a whispered exclamation and greeting.

A girl's face from the shade of the sitting-room was looking out at him, half-smiling, but with heightened colour and a suppressed agitation. The girl was not more than twenty-five, graceful, supple, and strong. Her chin was dimpled; across her right temple was a slight scar. She had eyes of a wonderful deep blue; they seemed to swim with light. As Foyle gazed at her for a moment dumfounded, with a quizzical suggestion and smiling still a little more, she said:

"You used to be a little quicker, Nett." The voice appeared to attempt unconcern; but it quivered from a force of feeling underneath. It was so long since she had seen him.

He was about to reply, but, at the instant, a reveller pushed him with a foot behind the knees so that they were sprung forward. The crowd laughed all save Billy Goat, who knew his man.

Like lightning, and with cold fury in his eyes, Foyle caught the tall cattleman by the forearm, and, with a swift, dexterous twist, had the fellow in his power.

"Down down, to your knees, you skunk," he said in a low, fierce voice.

The knees of the big man bent, Foyle had not taken lessons of Ogami, the Jap, for nothing they bent, and the cattleman squealed, so intense was the pain. It was break or bend; and he bent to the ground and lay there. Foyle stood over him for a moment, a hard light in his eyes, and then, as if bethinking himself, he looked at the other roisterers, and said:

"There's a limit, and he reached it. Your mouths are your own, and you can blow off to suit your fancy, but if any one thinks I'm a tame coyote to be poked with a stick !" He broke off, stooped over, and helped the man before him to his feet. The arm had been strained, and the big fellow nursed it.

"Hell, but you're a twister!" the cattleman said with a grimace of pain.

Billy Goat was a gentleman, after his kind, and he liked Sergeant Foyle with a great liking. He turned to the crowd and spoke.

Northern Lights, v5

"Say, boys, this mine's worked out. Let's leave the Happy Land to Foyle. Boys, what is he what is he? What is Sergeant Foyle boys?"

The roar of the song they all knew came in reply, as Billy Goat waved his arms about like the wild leader of a wild orchestra:

"Sergeant Foyle, oh, he's a knocker from the West,
He's a chase-me-Charley, come-and-kiss-me tiger from the zoo;
He's a dandy on the pinch, and he's got a double cinch
On the gent that's going careless, and he'll soon cinch you:
And he'll soon and he'll soon cinch you!"

Foyle watched them go, dancing, stumbling, calling back at him, as they moved towards the Prairie Home Hotel:

"And he'll soon-and he'll soon-cinch you!"

His under lip came out, his eyes half-closed, as he watched them. "I've done my last cinch. I've done my last cinch," he murmured.

Then, suddenly, the look in his face changed, the eyes swam as they had done a minute before at the sight of the girl in the room behind. Whatever his trouble was, that face had obscured it in a flash, and the pools of feeling far down in the depths of a lonely nature had been stirred. Recognition, memory, tenderness, desire swam in his face, made generous and kind the hard lines of the strong mouth. In an instant he had swung himself over the window-sill. The girl had drawn away now into a more shaded corner of the room, and she regarded him with a mingled anxiety and eagerness. Was she afraid of something? Did she fear that she knew not quite what, but it had to do with a long ago.

"It was time you hit out, Nett," she said, half shyly. "You're more patient than you used to be, but you're surer. My, that was a twist you gave him, Nett. Aren't you glad to see me?" she added hastily, and with an effort to hide her agitation.

He reached out and took her hand with a strange shyness, and a self-consciousness which was alien to his nature. The touch of her hand thrilled him. Their eyes met. She dropped hers. Then he gathered him self together. "Glad to see you? Of course, of course, I'm glad. You stunned me, Jo. Why, do you know where you are? You're a thousand miles from home. I can't get it through my head, not really. What brings you here? It's ten years ten years since I saw you, and you were only fifteen, but a fifteen that was as good as twenty."

He scanned her face closely. "What's that scar on your forehead, Jo? You hadn't that then."

"I ran up against something," she said evasively, her eyes glittering, "and it left that scar. Does it look so bad?"

"No, you'd never notice it, if you weren't looking close as I am. You see, I knew your face so well ten years ago."

He shook his head with a forced kind of smile. It became him, however, for he smiled rarely; and the smile was like a lantern turned on his face; it gave light and warmth to its quiet strength-or hardness.

"You were always quizzing," she said with an attempt at a laugh "always trying to find out things. That's why you made them reckon with you out here. You always could see behind things; always would have your own way; always were meant to be a success."

She was beginning to get control of herself again, was trying hard to keep things on the surface. "You were meant to succeed you had to," she added.

"I've been a failure a dead failure," he answered slowly. "So they say. So they said. You heard them, Jo."

He jerked his head towards the open window.

"Oh, those drunken fools!" she exclaimed indignantly, and her face hardened. "How I hate drink! It spoils everything."

There was silence for a moment. They were both thinking of the same thing of the same man. He repeated a question.

"What brings you out here, Jo?" he asked gently. "Dorland," she answered, her face setting into determination and anxiety.

His face became pinched. "Dorl!" he said heavily. "What for, Jo? What do you want with Dorl?"

"When Cynthia died she left her five hundred dollars a year to the baby, and "

"Yes, yes, I know. Well, Jo?"

"Well, it was all right for five years Dorland paid it in; but for five years he hasn't paid anything. He's taken it, stolen it from his own child by his own honest wife. I've come to get it anyway, to stop him from doing it any more. His own child it puts murder in my heart, Nett! I could kill him."

He nodded grimly. "That's likely. And you've kept, Dorl's child with your own money all these years?"

"I've got four hundred dollars a year, Nett, you know; and I've been dressmaking they say I've got taste," she added, with a whimsical smile.

Nett nodded his head. "Five years. That's twenty-five hundred dollars he's stolen from his own child. It's eight years old now, isn't it?"

"Bobby is eight and a half," she answered.

"And his schooling, and his clothing, and everything; and you have to pay for it all?"

"Oh, I don't mind, Nett, it isn't that. Bobby is Cynthia's child; and I love him love him; but I want him to have his rights. Dorl must give up his hold on that money or "

He nodded gravely. "Or you'll set the law on him?"

"It's one thing or the other. Better to do it now when Bobby is young and can't understand."

"Or read the newspapers," he commented thoughtfully.

"I don't think I've a hard heart," she continued, "but I'd like to punish him, if it wasn't that he's your brother, Nett; and if it wasn't for Bobby. Dorland was dreadfully cruel, even to Cynthia."

"How did you know he was up here?" he asked. "From the lawyer that pays over the money. Dorland has had it sent out here to Kowatin this two years. And he sent word to the lawyer a month ago that he wanted it to get here as usual. The letter left the same day as I did, and it got here yesterday with me, I suppose. He'll be after it—perhaps to—day. He wouldn't let it wait long, Dorl wouldn't."

Foyle started. "To—day to—day "

There was a gleam in his eyes, a setting of the lips, a line sinking into the forehead between the eyes.

"I've been watching for him all day, and I'll watch till he comes. I'm going to say some things to him that he won't forget. I'm going to get Bobby's money, or have the law do it unless you think I'm a brute, Nett." She looked at him wistfully.

"That's all right. Don't worry about me, Jo. He's my brother, but I know him I know him through and through. He's done everything that a man can do and not be hanged. A thief, a drunkard, and a brute and he killed a man out here," he added hoarsely. "I found it out myself myself. It was murder."

Suddenly, as he looked at her, an idea seemed to flash into his mind. He came very near and looked at her closely. Then he reached over and almost touched the scar on her forehead.

"Did he do that, Jo?"

For an instant she was silent and looked down at the floor. Presently she raised her eyes, her face suffused. Once or twice she tried to speak, but failed. At last she gained courage and said:

"After Cynthy's death I kept house for him for a year, taking care of little Bobby. I loved Bobby so he has Cynthy's eyes. One day Dorland oh, Nett, of course I oughtn't to have stayed there, I know it now; but I was only sixteen, and what did I understand! And my mother was dead. One day oh, please, Nett, you can guess. He said something to me. I made him leave the house. Before I could make plans what to do, he came back mad with drink. I went for Bobby, to get out of the house, but he caught hold of me. I struck him in the face, and he threw me against the edge of the open door. It made the scar."

Foyle's face was white. "Why did you never write and tell me that, Jo? You know that I " He stopped suddenly.

"You had gone out of our lives down there. I didn't know where you were for a long time; and then then it was all right about Bobby and me, except that Bobby didn't get the money that was his. But now "

Foyle's voice was hoarse and low. "He made that scar, and he and you only sixteen Oh, my God!" Suddenly his face reddened, and he choked with shame and anger. "And he's my brother!" was all that he could say.

"Do you see him up here ever?" she asked pityingly.

"I never saw him till a week ago." A moment, then he added: "The letter wasn't to be sent here in his own name, was it?"

She nodded. "Yes, in his own name, Dorland W. Foyle. Didn't he go by that name when you saw him?"

There was an oppressive silence, in which she saw that something moved him strangely, and then he answered: "No, he was going by the name of Halbeck Hiram Halbeck."

Northern Lights, v5

The girl gasped. Then the whole thing burst upon her. "Hiram Halbeck! Hiram Halbeck, the thief I read it all in the papers the thief that you caught, and that got away. And you've left the Mounted Police because of it oh, Nett!" Her eyes were full of tears, her face was drawn and grey.

He nodded. "I didn't know who he was till I arrested him," he said. "Then, afterward, I thought of his child, and let him get away; and for my poor old mother's sake. She never knew how bad he was even as a boy. But I remember how he used to steal and drink the brandy from her bedside, when she had the fever. She never knew the worst of him. But I let him away in the night, Jo, and I resigned, and they thought that Halbeck had beaten me, had escaped. Of course I couldn't stay in the Force, having done that. But, by the heaven above us, if I had him here now, I'd do the thing do it, so help me God!"

"Why should you ruin your life for him?" she said, with an outburst of indignation. All that was in her heart welled up in her eyes at the thought of what Foyle was. "You must not do it. You shall not do it. He must pay for his wickedness, not you. It would be a sin. You and what becomes of you mean so much." Suddenly with a flash of purpose she added: "He will come for that letter, Nett. He would run any kind of risk to get a dollar. He will come here for that letter perhaps today."

He shook his head moodily, oppressed by the trouble that was on him. "He's not likely to venture here, after what's happened."

"You don't know him as well as I do, Nett. He is so vain he'd do it, just to show that he could. He'd probably come in the evening. Does any one know him here? So many people pass through Kowatin every day. Has any one seen him?"

"Only Billy Goatry," he answered, working his way to a solution of the dark problem. "Only Billy Goatry knows him. The fellow that led the singing that was Goatry."

"There he is now," he added, as Billy Goat passed the window.

She came and laid a hand on his arm. "We've got to settle things with him," she said. "If Dorl comes, Nett "

There was silence for a moment, then he caught her hand in his and held it. "If he comes, leave him to me, Jo. You will leave him to me?" he added anxiously.

"Yes," she answered. "You'll do what's right—by Bobby?"

"And by Dorl, too," he replied strangely. There were loud footsteps without.

"It's Goatry," said Foyle. "You stay here. I'll tell him everything. He's all right; he's a true friend. He'll not interfere."

The handle of the door turned slowly. "You keep watch on the post—office, Jo," he added.

Goatry came round the opening door with a grin. "Hope I don't intrude," he said, stealing a half-leering look at the girl. As soon as he saw her face, however, he straightened himself up and took on different manners. He had not been so intoxicated as he had made, out, and he seemed only "mellow" as he stood before them, with his corrugated face and queer, quaint look, the eye with the cast in it blinking faster than the other.

"It's all right, Goatry," said Foyle. "This lady is, one of my family from the East."

"Goin' on by stage?" Goatry said vaguely, as they shook hands.

She did not reply, for she was looking down the street, and presently she started as she gazed. She laid a hand suddenly on Foyle's arm.

"See he's come," she said in a whisper, and as though not realising Goatry's presence. "He's come."

Goatry looked as well as Foyle. "Halbeck the devil!" he said.

Foyle turned to him. "Stand by, Goatry. I want you to keep a shut mouth. I've work to do."

Goatry held out his hand. "I'm with you. If you get him this time, clamp him, clamp him like a tooth in a harrow."

Halbeck had stopped his horse at the post-office door. Dismounting he looked quickly round, then drew the reins over the horse's head, letting them trail, as is the custom of the West.

A few swift words passed between Goatry and Foyle. "I'll do this myself, Jo," he whispered to the girl presently. "Go into another room. I'll bring him here."

In another minute Goatry was leading the horse away from the post-office, while Foyle stood waiting quietly at the door. The departing footsteps of the horse brought Halbeck swiftly to the doorway, with a letter in his hand.

"Hi, there, you damned sucker!" he called after Goatry, and then saw Foyle waiting.

"What the hell !" he said fiercely, his hand on something in his hip pocket.

"Keep quiet, Dorl. I want to have a little talk with you. Take your hand away from that gun take it away," he added with a meaning not to be misunderstood.

Halbeck knew that one shout would have the town on him, and he did not know what card his brother was going to play. He let his arm drop to his side. "What's your game? What do you want?" he asked surlily.

"Come over to the Happy Land Hotel," Foyle answered, and in the light of what was in his mind his words had a grim irony.

With a snarl Halbeck stepped out. Goatry, who had handed the horse over to the hostler, watched them coming.

"Why did I never notice the likeness before?" Goatry said to himself. "But, gosh! what a difference in the men. Foyle's going to double cinch him this time, I guess."

He followed them inside the hall of the Happy Land. When they stepped into the sitting-room, he stood at the door waiting. The hotel was entirely empty, the roisterers at the Prairie Home having drawn off the idlers and spectators. The barman was nodding behind the bar, the proprietor was moving about in the backyard inspecting a horse. There was a cheerful warmth everywhere, the air was like an elixir, the pungent smell of a pine-tree at the door gave a kind of medicament to the indrawn breath. And to Billy Goat, who sometimes sang in the choir of a church not a hundred miles away for people agreed to forget his occasional sprees there came, he knew not why, the words of a hymn he had sung only the preceding Sunday:

"As pants the hart for cooling streams,
When heated in the chase "

The words kept ringing in his ears as he listened to the conversation inside the room the partition was thin, the door thinner, and he heard much. Foyle had asked him not to intervene, but only to stand by and await the issue of

this final conference. He meant, however, to take a hand in, if he thought he was needed, and he kept his ear glued to the door. If he thought Foyle needed him his fingers were on the handle of the door.

"Now, hurry up! What do you want with me?" asked Halbeck of his brother.

"Take your time," said ex-Sergeant Foyle, as he drew the blind three-quarters down, so that they could not be seen from the street.

"I'm in a hurry, I tell you. I've got my plans. I'm going South. I've only just time to catch the Canadian Pacific three days from now, riding hard."

"You're not going South, Dorl."

"Where am I going, then?" was the sneering reply. "Not farther than the Happy Land."

"What the devil's all this? You don't mean you're trying to arrest me again, after letting me go?"

"You don't need to ask. You're my prisoner. You're my prisoner," he said in a louder voice "until you free yourself."

"I'll do that damn quick, then," said the other, his hand flying to his hip.

"Sit down," was the sharp rejoinder, and a pistol was in his face before he could draw his own weapon. "Put your gun on the table," Foyle said quietly. Halbeck did so. There was no other way.

Foyle drew it over to himself. His brother made a motion to rise.

"Sit still, Dorl," came the warning voice.

White with rage, the freebooter sat still, his dissipated face and heavy angry lips looking like a debauched and villainous caricature of his brother before him.

"Yes, I suppose you'd have potted me, Dorl," said the ex-sergeant.

"You'd have thought no more of doing that than you did of killing Linley, the ranchman; than you did of trying to ruin Jo Byndon, your wife's sister, when she was sixteen years old, when she was caring for your child giving her life for the child you brought into the world."

"What in the name of hell it's a lie!"

"Don't bluster. I know the truth."

"Who told you—the truth?"

"She did to-day an hour ago."

"She here out here?" There was a new cowed note in the voice.

"She is in the next room."

"What did she come here for?"

"To make you do right by your own child. I wonder what a jury of decent men would think about a man who robbed his child for five years, and let that child be fed and clothed and cared for by the girl he tried to destroy, the girl he taught what sin there was in the world."

"She put you up to this. She was always in love with you, and you know it."

There was a dangerous look in Foyle's eyes, and his jaw set hard. "There would be no shame in a decent woman caring for me, even if it was true. I haven't put myself outside the boundary as you have. You're my brother, but you're the worst scoundrel in the country the worst unhanged. Put on the table there the letter in your pocket. It holds five hundred dollars belonging to your child. There's twenty-five hundred dollars more to be accounted for."

The other hesitated, then with an oath threw the letter on the table. "I'll pay the rest as soon as I can, if you'll stop this damned tomfoolery," he said sullenly, for he saw that he was in a hole.

"You'll pay it, I suppose, out of what you stole from the C.P.R. contractor's chest. No, I don't think that will do."

"You want me to go to prison, then?"

"I think not. The truth would come out at the trial the whole truth the murder, and all. There's your child Bobby. You've done him enough wrong already. Do you want him but it doesn't matter whether you do or not do you want him to carry through life the fact that his father was a jail-bird and a murderer, just as Jo Byndon carries the scar you made when you threw her against the door?"

"What do you want with me, then?" The man sank slowly and heavily back into the chair.

"There is a way have you never thought of it? When you threatened others as you did me, and life seemed such a little thing in others can't you think?"

Bewildered, the man looked around helplessly. In the silence which followed Foyle's words his brain was struggling to see a way out. Foyle's further words seemed to come from a great distance.

"It's not too late to do the decent thing. You'll never repent of all you've done; you'll never do different."

The old reckless, irresponsible spirit revived in the man; he had both courage and bravado, he was not hopeless yet of finding an escape from the net. He would not beg, he would struggle.

"I've lived as I meant to, and I'm not going to snivel or repent now. It's all a rotten business, anyhow," he rejoined.

With a sudden resolution the ex-sergeant put his own pistol in his pocket, then pushed Halbeck's pistol over towards him on the table. Halbeck's eyes lighted eagerly, grew red with excitement, then a change passed over them. They now settled on the pistol, and stayed. He heard Foyle's voice. "It's with you to do what you ought to do. Of course you can kill me. My pistol's in my pocket. But I don't think you will. You've murdered one man. You won't load your soul up with another. Besides, if you kill me, you will never get away from Kowatin alive. But it's with you take your choice. It's me or you."

Halbeck's fingers crept out and found the pistol. "Do your duty, Dorl," said the ex-sergeant as he turned his back on his brother.

The door of the room opened, and Goatry stepped inside softly. He had work to do, if need be, and his face showed it. Halbeck did not see him.

Northern Lights, v5

There was a demon in Halbeck's eyes, as his brother stood, his back turned, taking his chances. A large mirror hung on the wall opposite Halbeck. Goatry was watching Halbeck's face in the glass, and saw the danger. He measured his distance.

All at once Halbeck caught Goatry's face in the mirror. The dark devilry faded out of his eyes. His lips moved in a whispered oath. Every way was blocked.

With a sudden wild resolution he raised the pistol to his head. It cracked, and he fell back heavily in the chair. There was a red trickle at the temple.

He had chosen the best way out.

"He had the pluck," said Goatry, as Foyle swung round with a face of misery.

A moment afterward came a rush of people. Goatry kept them back.

"Sergeant Foyle arrested Halbeck, and Halbeck's shot himself," Goatry explained to them.

A white-faced girl with a scar on her temple made her way into the room.

"Come away—come away, Jo," said the voice of the man she loved; and he did not let her see the lifeless figure in the chair.

Three days later the plains swallowed them, as they made their way with Billy Goatry to the headquarters of the Riders of the Plains, where Sergeant Foyle was asked to reconsider his resignation: which he did.

THE WHISPERER

"And thou shalt be brought down and shalt speak out of the ground,
and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be
as of one that hath a familiar spirit out of the ground, and thy
speech shall whisper out of the dust."

The harvest was all in, and, as far as eye could observe nothing remained of the golden sea of wheat which had covered the wide prairie save the yellow stubble, the bed of an ocean of wealth which had been gathered. Here, the yellow level was broken by a dark patch of fallow land, there, by a covert of trees also tinged with yellow, or deepening to crimson and mauve the harbinger of autumn. The sun had not the insistent and intensive strength of more southerly climes; it was buoyant, confident and heartening, and it shone in a turquoise vault which covered and endeared the wide, even world beneath. Now and then a flock of wild ducks whirred past, making for the marshes or the innumerable lakes that vitalised the expanse, or buzzards hunched heavily along, frightened from some far resort by eager sportsmen.

That was above; but beneath, on a level with the unlifted eye, were houses here and there, looking in the vastness like dolls' habitations. Many of the houses stood blank and staring in the expanse, but some had trees, and others little oases of green. Everywhere prosperity, everywhere the strings of life pulled taut, signs that energy had been straining on the leash.

Yet there was one spot where it seemed that deadness made encampment. It could not be seen in the sweep of the eye, you must have travelled and looked vigilantly to find it; but it was there a lake shimmering in the eager sun, washing against a reedy shore, a little river running into the reedy lake at one end and out at, the other, a small,

Northern Lights, v5

dilapidated house half hid in a wood that stretched for half a mile or so upon a rising ground. In front of the house, not far from the lake, a man was lying asleep upon the ground, a rough felt hat drawn over his eyes.

Like the house, the man seemed dilapidated also: a slovenly, ill-dressed, demoralised figure he looked, even with his face covered. He seemed in a deep sleep. Wild ducks settled on the lake not far from him with a swish and flutter; a coyote ran past, veering as it saw the recumbent figure; a prairie hen rustled by with a shrill cluck, but he seemed oblivious to all. If asleep, he was evidently dreaming, for now and then he started, or his body twitched, and a muttering came from beneath the hat.

The battered house, the absence of barn or stable or garden, or any token of thrift or energy, marked the man as an excrescence in this theatre of hope and fruitful toil. It all belonged to some degenerate land, some exhausted civilisation, not to this field of vigour where life rang like silver.

So the man lay for hour upon hour. He slept as though he had been upon a long journey in which the body was worn to helplessness. Or was it that sleep of the worn-out spirit which, tortured by remembrance and remorse, at last sinks into the depths where the conscious vexes the unconscious a little of fire, a little of ice, and now and then the turn of the screw?

The day marched nobly on towards evening, growing out of its blue and silver into a pervasive golden gleam; the bare, greyish houses on the prairie were transformed into miniature palaces of light. Presently a girl came out of the woods behind, looking at the neglected house with a half-pitying curiosity. She carried in one hand a fishing rod which had been telescoped till it was no bigger than a cane; in the other she carried a small fishing basket. Her father's shooting and fishing camp was a few miles away by a lake of greater size than this which she approached. She had tired of the gay company in camp, brought up for sport from beyond the American border where she also belonged, and she had come to explore the river running into this reedy lake. She turned from the house and came nearer to the lake, shaking her head, as though compassionating the poor, folk who lived there. She was beautiful. Her hair was brown, going to tawny, but in this soft light which enwrapped her, she was in a sort of topaz flame. As she came on, suddenly she stopped as though transfixed. She saw the man and saw also a tragedy afoot.

The man stirred violently in his sleep, cried out, and started up. As he did so, a snake, disturbed in its travel past him, suddenly raised itself in anger. Startled out of sleep by some inner torture, the man heard the sinister rattle he knew so well, and gazed paralysed.

The girl had been but a few feet away when she first saw the man and his angry foe. An instant, then, with the instinct of the woods and the plains, and the courage that has habitation everywhere, dropping her basket she sprang forward noiselessly. The short, telescoped fishing rod she carried swung round her head and completed its next half-circle at the head of the reptile, even as it was about to strike. The blow was sure, and with half-severed head the snake fell dead upon the ground beside the man.

He was like one who has been projected from one world to another, dazed, stricken, fearful. Presently the look of agonised dismay gave way to such an expression of relief as might come upon the face of a reprieved victim about to be given to the fire, or to the knife that flays. The place of dreams from which he had emerged was like hell, and this was some world of peace that he had not known these many years. Always one had been at his elbow "a familiar spirit out of the ground" whispering in his ear. He had been down in the abysses of life.

He glanced again at the girl, and realised what she had done: she had saved his life. Whether it had been worth saving was another question; but he had been near to the brink, had looked in, and the animal in him had shrunk back from the precipice in a confused agony of fear. He staggered to his feet.

"Where do you come from?" he said, pulling his coat closer to hide the ragged waistcoat underneath, and adjusting his worn and dirty hat in his youth he had been vain and ambitious and good-looking also.

He asked his question in no impertinent tone, but in the low voice of one who "shall whisper out of the dust." He had not yet recovered from the first impression of his awakening, that the world in which he now stood was not a real world.

She understood, and half in pity and half in conquered repugnance said:

"I come from a camp beyond" she indicated the direction by a gesture. "I had been fishing" she took up the basket "and chanced on you then." She glanced at the snake significantly.

"You killed it in the nick of time," he said, in a voice that still spoke of the ground, but with a note of half-shamed gratitude. "I want to thank you," he added. "You were brave. It would have turned on you if you had missed. I know them. I've killed five." He spoke very slowly, huskily.

"Well, you are safe that is the chief thing," she rejoined, making as though to depart. But presently she turned back. "Why are you so dreadfully poor and everything?" she asked gently.

His eye wandered over the lake and back again before he answered her, in a dull, heavy tone: "I've had bad luck, and, when you get down, there are plenty to kick you farther."

"You weren't always poor as you are now I mean long ago, when you were young."

"I'm not so old," he rejoined sluggishly "only thirty-four."

She could not suppress her astonishment. She looked at the hair already grey, the hard, pinched face, the lustreless eyes.

"Yet it must seem long to you," she said with meaning. Now he laughed a laugh sodden and mirthless. He was thinking of his boyhood. Everything, save one or two spots all fire or all darkness, was dim in his debilitated mind.

"Too far to go back," he said, with a gleam of the intelligence which had been strong in him once.

She caught the gleam. She had wisdom beyond her years. It was the greater because her mother was dead, and she had had so much wealth to dispense, for her father was rich beyond counting, and she controlled his household, and helped to regulate his charities. She saw that he was not of the labouring classes, that he had known better days; his speech, if abrupt and cheerless, was grammatical.

"If you cannot go back, you can go forwards," she said firmly. "Why should you be the only man in this beautiful land who lives like this, who is idle when there is so much to do, who sleeps in the daytime when there is so much time to sleep at night?"

A faint flush came on the greyish, colourless face. "I don't sleep at night," he returned moodily.

"Why don't you sleep?" she asked.

He did not answer, but stirred the body of the snake with his foot. The tail moved; he stamped upon the head with almost frenzied violence, out of keeping with his sluggishness.

She turned away, yet looked back once more she felt tragedy around her. "It is never too late to mend," she said, and moved on, but stopped; for a young man came running from the woods towards her.

"I've had a hunt such a hunt for you," the young man said eagerly, then stopped short when he saw to whom she had been talking. A look of disgust came upon his face as he drew her away, his hand on her arm.

"In Heaven's name, why did you talk to that man?" he said. "You ought not to have trusted yourself near him."

"What has he done?" she asked. "Is he so bad?"

"I've heard about him. I inquired the other day. He was once in a better position as a ranchman ten years ago; but he came into some money one day, and he changed at once. He never had a good character; even before he got his money he used to gamble, and was getting a bad name. Afterwards he began drinking, and he took to gambling harder than ever. Presently his money all went and he had to work; but his bad habits had fastened on him, and now he lives from hand to mouth, sometimes working for a month, sometimes idle for months. There's something sinister about him, there's some mystery; for poverty or drink even and he doesn't drink much now couldn't make him what he is. He doesn't seek company, and he walks sometimes endless miles talking to himself, going as hard as he can. How did you come to speak to him, Grace?"

She told him all, with a curious abstraction in her voice, for she was thinking of the man from a standpoint which her companion could not realise. She was also trying to verify something in her memory. Ten years ago, so her lover had just said, the poor wretch behind them had been a different man; and there had shot into her mind the face of a ranchman she had seen with her father, the railway king, one evening when his "special" had stopped at a railway station on his tour through Montana ten years ago. Why did the face of the ranchman which had fixed itself on her memory then, because he had come on the evening of her birthday and had spoiled it for her, having taken her father away from her for an hour why did his face come to her now? What had it to do with the face of this outcast she had just left?

"What is his name?" she asked at last.

"Roger Lygon," he answered.

"Roger Lygon," she repeated mechanically. Something in the man chained her thought his face that moment when her hand saved him and the awful fear left him, and a glimmer of light came into his eyes.

But her lover beside her broke into song. He was happy with her. Everything was before him, her beauty, her wealth, herself. He could not dwell upon dismal things; his voice rang out on the sharp sweet evening air:

"Oh, where did you get them, the bonny, bonny roses
That blossom in your cheeks, and the morning in your eyes?
'I got them on the North Trail, the road that never closes,
That widens to the seven gold gates of paradise.'
'O come, let us camp in the North Trail together,
With the night-fires lit and the tent-pegs down.'"

Left alone, the man by the reedy lake stood watching them until they were out of view. The song came back to him, echoing across the waters:

"O come, let us camp on the North Trail together,
With the night-fires lit and the tent-pegs down."

The sunset glow, the girl's presence, had given him a moment's illusion, had absorbed him for a moment, acting on his deadened nature like a narcotic at once soothing and stimulating. As some wild animal in a forgotten land, coming upon ruins of a vast civilisation, towers, temples, and palaces, in the golden glow of an Eastern evening,

stands abashed and vaguely wondering, having neither reason to understand, nor feeling to enjoy, yet is arrested and abashed, so he stood. He had lived the last three years so much alone, had been cut off so completely from his kind had lived so much alone. Yet to-night, at last, he would not be alone.

Some one was coming to-night, some one whom he had not seen for a long time. Letters had passed, the object of the visit had been defined, and he had spent the intervening days since the last letter had arrived, now agitated, now apathetic and sullen, now struggling with some invisible being that kept whispering in his ear, saying to him, "It was the price of fire, and blood, and shame. You did it you you you! You are down, and you will never get up. You can only go lower still fire, and blood, and shame!"

Criminal as he was he had never become hardened, he had only become degraded. Crime was not his vocation. He had no gift for it; still the crime he had committed had never been discovered the crime that he did with others. There were himself and Dupont and another. Dupont was coming to-night Dupont who had profited by the crime, and had not spent his profits, but had built upon them to further profit; for Dupont was avaricious and prudent, and a born criminal. Dupont had never had any compunctions or remorse, had never lost a night's sleep because of what they two had done, instigated thereto by the other, who had paid them so well for the dark thing.

The other was Henderley, the financier. He was worse perhaps than Dupont, for he was in a different sphere of life, was rich beyond counting, and had been early nurtured in quiet Christian surroundings. The spirit of ambition, rivalry, and the methods of a degenerate and cruel finance had seized him, mastered him; so that, under the cloak of power as a toreador hides the blade under the red cloth before his enemy the toro he held a sword of capital which did cruel and vicious things, at last becoming criminal also. Henderley had incited and paid; the others, Dupont and Lygon, had acted and received. Henderley had had no remorse, none at any rate that weighed upon him; for he had got used to ruining rivals, and seeing strong men go down, and those who had fought him come to beg or borrow of him in the end. He had seen more than one commit suicide, and those they loved go down and farther down, and he had helped these up a little, but not enough to put them near his own plane again; and he could not see it never occurred to him that he had done any evil to them. Dupont thought upon his crimes now and then, and his heart hardened, for he had no moral feeling; Henderley did not think at all. It was left to the man of the reedy lake to pay the penalty of apprehension, to suffer the effects of crime upon a nature not naturally criminal.

Again and again, how many hundreds of times, had Roger Lygon seen in his sleep had even seen awake so did hallucination possess him the new cattle trail he had fired for scores of miles. The fire had destroyed the grass over millions of acres, two houses had been burned and three people had lost their lives; all to satisfy the savage desire of one man, to destroy the chance of a cattle trade over a great section of country for the railway which was to compete with his own an act which, in the end, was futile, failed of its purpose. Dupont and Lygon had been paid their price, and had disappeared, and been forgotten they were but pawns in his game and there was no proof against Henderley. Henderley had forgotten. Lygon wished to forget, but Dupont remembered, and meant now to reap fresh profit by the remembrance.

Dupont was coming to-night, and the hatchet of crime was to be dug up again. So it had been planned. As the shadows fell, Lygon roused himself from his trance with a shiver. It was not cold, but in him there was a nervous agitation, making him cold from head to foot; his body seemed as impoverished as his mind. Looking with heavy-lidded eyes across the prairie, he saw in the distance the barracks of the Riders of the Plains and the jail near by, and his shuddering ceased. There was where he belonged, within four stone walls; yet here he was free to go where he willed, to live as he willed, with no eye upon him. With no eye upon him? There was no eye, but there was the Whisperer whom he could never drive away. Morning and night he heard the words, "You you you! Fire, and blood, and shame!" He had snatched sleep when he could find it, after long, long hours of tramping over the plains, ostensibly to shoot wild fowl, but in truth to bring on a great bodily fatigue and sleep. His sleep only came then in the first watches of the night. As the night wore on the Whisperer began again, as the cloud of weariness lifted a little from him, and the senses were released from the heavy sedative of

unnatural exertion.

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The dusk deepened. The moon slowly rose. He cooked his scanty meal, and took a deep draught from a horn of whiskey from beneath a board in the flooring. He had not the courage to face Dupont without it, nor yet to forget what he must forget, if he was to do the work Dupont came to arrange he must forget the girl who had saved his life and the influence of those strange moments in which she had spoken down to him, in the abyss where he had been lying.

He sat in the doorway, a fire gleaming behind him; he drank in the good air as though his lungs were thirsty for it, and saw the silver glitter of the moon upon the water. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the shining path the moon made upon the reedy lake fascinated his eye. Everything was so still except that whisper louder in his ear than it had ever been before.

Suddenly, upon the silver path upon the lake there shot a silent canoe, with a figure as silently paddling towards him. He gazed for a moment dismayed, and then got to his feet with a jerk.

"Dupont," he said mechanically.

The canoe swished among the reeds and rushes, scraped on the shore, and a tall, burly figure sprang from it, and stood still, looking at the house.

"Qui reste la Lygon?" he asked.

"Dupont," was the nervous, hesitating reply. Dupont came forwards quickly. "Ah, ben, here we are again so," he grunted cheerily.

Entering the house they sat before the fire, holding their hands to the warmth from force of habit, though the night was not cold.

"Ben, you will do it to-night then?" Dupont said. "Sacre, it is time!"

"Do what?" rejoined the other heavily.

An angry light leapt into Dupont's eyes. "You not unnerstan' my letters— bah! You know it all right, so queeck."

The other remained silent, staring into the fire with wide, searching eyes.

Dupont put a hand on him. "You ketch my idee queeck. We mus' have more money from that Henderley certainlee. It is ten years, and he t'ink it is all right. He t'ink we come no more becos' he give five t'ousan' dollars to us each. That was to do the t'ing, to fire the country. Now we want another ten t'ousan' to us each, to forget we do it for him hein?"

Still there was no reply. Dupont went on, watching the other furtively, for he did not like this silence. But he would not resent it till he was sure there was good cause.

"It comes to suit us. He is over there at the Old Man Lak', where you can get at him easy, not like in the city where he lif'. Over in the States, he laugh mebbe, becos' he is at home, an' can buy off the law. But here it is Canadaw, an' they not care eef he have hunder' meillion dollar. He know that sure. Eef you say you not care a dam to go to jail, so you can put him there, too, becos' you have not'ing, an' so dam seeck of everyt'ing, he will

t'ink ten t'ousan' dollar same as one cent to Nic Dupont ben sur!"

Lygon nodded his head, still holding his hands to the blaze. With ten thousand dollars he could get away into into another world somewhere, some world where he could forget; as he forgot for a moment this afternoon when the girl said to him, "It is never too late to mend."

Now as he thought of her, he pulled his coat together, and arranged the rough scarf at his neck involuntarily. Ten thousand dollars but ten thousand dollars by blackmail, hush-money, the reward of fire, and blood, and shame! Was it to go on? Was he to commit a new crime?

He stirred, as though to shake off the net that he felt twisting round him, in the hands of the robust and powerful Dupont, on whom crime sat so lightly, who had flourished while he, Lygon, had gone lower and lower. Ten years ago he had been the better man, had taken the lead, was the master, Dupont the obedient confederate, the tool. Now, Dupont, once the rough river-driver, grown prosperous in a large way for him who might yet be mayor of his town in Quebec he held the rod of rule. Lygon was conscious that the fifty dollars sent him every New Year for five years by Dupont had been sent with a purpose, and that he was now Dupont's tool. Debilitated, demoralised, how could he, even if he wished, struggle against this powerful confederate, as powerful in will as in body? Yet if he had his own way he would not go to Henderley. He had lived with "a familiar spirit" so long, he feared the issue of this next excursion into the fens of crime.

Dupont was on his feet now. "He will be here only three days more I haf find it so. To-night it mus' be done. As we go I will tell you what to say. I will wait at the Forks, an' we will come back togedder. His cheque will do. Eef he gif at all, the cheque is all right. He will not stop it. Eef he haf the money, it is better sacre yes. Eef he not gif well, I will tell you, there is the other railway man he try to hurt, how would he like But I will tell you on the river. Main'enant queeck, we go."

Without a word Lygon took down another coat and put it on. Doing so he concealed a weapon quickly as Dupont stooped to pick a coal for his pipe from the blaze. Lygon had no fixed purpose in taking a weapon with him; it was only a vague instinct of caution that moved him.

In the canoe on the river, in an almost speechless apathy, he heard Dupont's voice giving him instructions.

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Henderley, the financier, had just finished his game of whist and dismissed his friends it was equivalent to dismissal, rough yet genial as he seemed to be, so did immense wealth and its accompanying power affect his relations with those about him. In everything he was "considered." He was in good humour, for he had won all the evening, and with a smile he rubbed his hands among the notes three thousand dollars it was. It was like a man with a pocket full of money, chuckling over a coin he has found in the street. Presently he heard a rustle of the inner tent-curtain and swung round. He faced the man from the reedy lake.

Instinctively he glanced round for a weapon, mechanically his hands firmly grasped the chair in front of him.

He had been in danger of his life many times, and he had no fear. He had been threatened with assassination more than once, and he had got used to the idea of danger; life to him was only a game.

He kept his nerve; he did not call out; he looked his visitor in the eyes.

"What are you doing here? Who are you?" he said.

"Don't you know me?" answered Lygon, gazing intently at him.

Face to face with the man who had tempted him to crime, Lygon had a new sense of boldness, a sudden feeling of reprisal, a rushing desire to put the screw upon him. At sight of this millionaire with the pile of notes before him there vanished the sickening hesitation of the afternoon, of the journey with Dupont. The look of the robust, healthy financier was like acid in a wound; it maddened him.

"You will know me better soon," Lygon added, his head twitching with excitement.

Henderley recognised him now. He gripped the armchair spasmodically, but presently regained a complete composure. He knew the game that was forward here; and he also thought that if once he yielded to blackmail there would never be an end to it. He made no pretence, but came straight to the point.

"You can do nothing; there is no proof," he said with firm assurance.

"There is Dupont," answered Lygon doggedly.

"Who is Dupont?"

"The French Canadian who helped me I divided with him."

"You said the man who helped you died. You wrote that to me. I suppose you are lying now."

Henderley coolly straightened the notes on the table, smoothing out the wrinkles, arranging them according to their denominations with an apparently interested eye; yet he was vigilantly watching the outcast before him. To yield to blackmail would be fatal; not to yield to it he could not see his way. He had long ago forgotten the fire, and blood, and shame. No Whisperer reminded him of that black page in the history of his life; he had been immune of conscience. He could not understand this man before him. It was as bad a case of human degradation as ever he had seen he remembered the stalwart, if dissipated, ranchman who had acted on his instigation. He knew now that he had made a foolish blunder then, that the scheme had been one of his failures; but he had never looked on it as with eyes reproving crime. As a hundred thoughts tending towards the solution of the problem by which he was faced, flashed through his mind, and he rejected them all, he repeated mechanically the phrase, "I suppose you are lying now."

"Dupont is here not a mile away," was the reply. "He will give proof. He would go to jail or to the gallows to put you there, if you do not pay. He is a devil Dupont."

Still the great man could not see his way out. He must temporise for a little longer, for rashness might bring scandal or noise; and near by was his daughter, the apple of his eye.

"What do you want? How much did you figure you could get out of me, if I let you bleed me?" he asked sneeringly and coolly. "Come now, how much?"

Lygon, in whom a blind hatred of the man still raged, was about to reply, when he heard a voice calling, "Daddy, Daddy!"

Suddenly the red, half-insane light died down in Lygon's eyes. He saw the snake upon the ground by the reedy lake, the girl standing over it the girl with the tawny hair. This was her voice.

Henderley had made a step towards a curtain opening into another room of the great tent, but before he could reach it the curtain was pushed back, and the girl entered with a smile.

"May I come in?" she said; then stood still astonished; seeing Lygon.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Oh you!"

All at once a look came into her face which stirred it as a flying insect stirs the water of a pool. On the instant she remembered that she had seen the man before.

It was ten years ago in Montana on the night of her birthday. Her father had been called away to talk with this man, and she had seen him from the steps of the "special." It was only the caricature of the once strong, erect ranchman that she saw, but there was no mistake, she recognised him now.

Lygon, dumfounded, looked from her to her father, and he saw now in Henderley's eyes a fear that was not to be misunderstood.

Here was where Henderley could be smitten, could be brought to his knees. It was the vulnerable part of him. Lygon could see that he was stunned. The great financier was in his power. He looked back again to the girl, and her face was full of trouble.

A sharp suspicion was in her heart that somehow or other her father was responsible for this man's degradation and ruin. She looked Lygon in the eyes.

"Did you want to see me?" she asked.

She scarcely knew why she said it; but she was sensible of trouble, maybe of tragedy, somewhere; and she had a vague dread of she knew not what, for hide it, avoid it, as she had done so often, there was in her heart an unhappy doubt concerning her father.

A great change had come over Lygon. Her presence had altered him. He was again where she had left him in the afternoon.

He heard her say to her father, "This was the man I told you of at the reedy lake. Did you come to see me?" she repeated.

"I did not know you were here," he answered. "I came" he was conscious of Henderley's staring eyes fixed upon him helplessly "I came to ask your father if he would not buy my shack. There is good shooting at the lake; the ducks come plenty, sometimes. I want to get away, to start again somewhere. I've been a failure. I want to get away, right away south. If he would buy it I could start again. I've had no luck." He had invented it on the moment, but the girl understood better than Lygon or Henderley could have dreamed. She had seen the change pass over Lygon. Henderley had a hand on himself again, and the startled look went out of his eyes.

"What do you want for your shack and the lake?" he asked with restored confidence. The fellow no doubt was grateful that his daughter had saved his life, he thought.

"Five hundred dollars," answered Lygon quickly. Henderley would have handed over all that lay on the table before him but that he thought it better not to do so. "I'll buy it," he said. "You seem to have been hit hard. Here is the money. Bring me the deed to-morrow to-morrow."

"I'll not take the money till I give you the deed," said Lygon. "It will do to-morrow. It's doing me a good turn. I'll get away and start again somewhere. I've done no good up here. Thank you, sir thank you." Before they realised it, the tent-curtain rose and fell, and he was gone into the night.

The trouble was still deep in the girl's eyes as she kissed her father, and he, with an overdone cheerfulness, wished her a good night.

Northern Lights, v5

The man of iron had been changed into a man of straw once at least in his lifetime.

Lygon found Dupont at the Forks.

"Eh ben, it is all right yes?" Dupont asked eagerly as Lygon joined him.

"Yes, it is all right," answered Lygon.

With an exulting laugh and an obscene oath, Dupont pushed out the canoe, and they got away into the moonlight. No word was spoken for some distance, but Dupont kept giving grunts of satisfaction.

"You got the ten t'ousan' each in cash or cheque, eh? The cheque or the money–hein?"

"I've got nothing," answered Lygon. Dupont dropped his paddle with a curse.

"You got not'ing! You said eet was all right," he growled.

"It is all right. I got nothing. I asked for nothing. I have had enough. I have finished."

With a roar of rage Dupont sprang on him, and caught him by the throat as the canoe swayed and dipped. He was blind with fury.

Lygon tried with one hand for his knife, and got it, but the pressure on his throat was growing terrible. For minutes the struggle continued, for Lygon was fighting with the desperation of one who makes his last awful onset against fate and doom.

Dupont also had his knife at work. At last it drank blood, but as he got it home, he suddenly reeled blindly, lost his balance, and lurched into the water with a groan.

Lygon, weapon in hand, and bleeding freely, waited for him to rise and make for the canoe again.

Ten, twenty, fifty seconds passed. Dupont did not rise. A minute went by, and still there was no stir, no sign. Dupont would never rise again. In his wild rage he had burst a blood vessel on the brain.

Lygon bound up his reeking wound as best he could. He did it calmly, whispering to himself the while.

"I must do it. I must get there if I can. I will not be afraid to die then," he muttered to himself. Presently he grasped an oar and paddled feebly.

A slight wind had risen, and, as he turned the boat in to face the Forks again, it helped to carry the canoe to the landing–place.

Lygon dragged himself out. He did not try to draw the canoe up, but began this journey of a mile back to the tent he had left so recently. First, step by step, leaning against trees, drawing himself forwards, a journey as long to his determined mind as from youth to age. Would it never end? It seemed a terrible climbing up the sides of a cliff, and, as he struggled fainting on, all sorts of sounds were in his ears, but he realised that the Whisperer was no longer there. The sounds he heard did not torture, they helped his stumbling feet. They were like the murmur of waters, like the sounds of the forest and soft, booming bells. But the bells were only the beatings of his heart–so loud, so swift.

He was on his knees now crawling on—on—on. At last there came a light, suddenly bursting on him from a tent, he was so near. Then he called, and called again, and fell forwards on his face. But now he heard a voice above him. It was her voice. He had blindly struggled on to die near her, near where she was, she was so pitiful and good.

He had accomplished his journey, and her voice was speaking above him. There were other voices, but it was only hers that he heard.

"God help him oh, God help him!" she was saying. He drew a long quiet breath. "I will sleep now," he said clearly.

He would hear the Whisperer no more.

AS DEEP AS THE SEA

"What can I do, Dan? I'm broke, too. My last dollar went to pay my last debt to—day. I've nothing but what I stand in. I've got prospects, but I can't discount prospects at the banks." The speaker laughed bitterly. "I've reaped and I'm sowing, the same as you, Dan."

The other made a nervous motion of protest. "No; not the same as me, Flood not the same. It's sink or swim with me, and if you can't help me oh, I'd take my gruel without whining, if it wasn't for Di! It's that knocks me over. It's the shame to her. Oh, what a cursed ass and fool and thief, I've been!"

"Thief—thief?"

Flood Rawley dropped the flaming match with which he was about to light a cheroot, and stood staring, his dark—blue eyes growing wider, his worn, handsome face becoming drawn, as swift conviction mastered him. He felt that the black words which had fallen from his friend's lips from the lips of Diana Welldon's brother were the truth. He looked at the plump face, the full amiable eyes, now misty with fright, at the characterless hand nervously feeling the golden moustache, at the well—fed, inert body; and he knew that whatever the trouble or the peril, Dan Welldon could not surmount it alone.

"What is it?" Rawley asked rather sharply, his fingers running through his slightly grizzled, black hair, but not excitedly, for he wanted no scenes; and if this thing could hurt Di Welldon, and action was necessary, he must remain cool. What she was to him, Heaven and he only knew; what she had done for him, perhaps neither understood fully as yet. "What is it quick?" he added, and his words were like a sharp grip upon Dan Welldon's shoulder. "Racing cards?"

Dan nodded. "Yes, over at Askatoon; five hundred on Jibway, the favourite he fell at the last fence; five hundred at poker with Nick Fison; and a thousand in land speculation at Edmonton, on margin. Everything went wrong."

"And so you put your hand in the railway company's money—chest?"

"It seemed such a dead certainty Jibway; and the Edmonton corner—blocks, too. I'd had luck with Nick before; but well, there it is, Flood."

"They know the railway people Shaughnessy knows?"

"Yes, the president knows. He's at Calgary now. They telegraphed him, and he wired to give me till midnight to pay up, or go to jail. They're watching me now. I can't stir. There's no escape, and there's no one I can ask for help but you. That's why I've come, Flood."

Northern Lights, v5

"Lord, what a fool! Couldn't you see what the end would be, if your plunging didn't come off? You you oughtn't to bet, or speculate, or play cards, you're not clever enough. You've got blind rashness, and so you think you're bold. And Di oh, you idiot! And on a salary of a thousand dollars a year!"

"I suppose Di would help me; but I couldn't explain." The weak face puckered, a lifeless kind of tear gathered in the ox-like eyes.

"Yes, she probably would help you. She'd probably give you all she's saved to go to Europe with and study, saved from her pictures sold at twenty per cent of their value; and she'd mortgage the little income she's got to keep her brother out of jail. Of course she would, and of course you ought to be ashamed of yourself for thinking of it." Rawley lighted his cigar and smoked fiercely.

"It would be better for her than my going to jail," stubbornly replied the other. "But I don't want to tell her, or to ask her for money. That's why I've come to you. You needn't be so hard, Flood; you've not been a saint; and Di knows it."

Rawley took the cheroot from his mouth, threw back his head, and laughed mirthlessly, ironically. Then suddenly he stopped and looked round the room till his eyes rested on a portrait-drawing which hung on the wall opposite the window, through which the sun poured. It was the face of a girl with beautiful bronzed hair, and full, fine, beautifully modelled face, with brown eyes deep and brooding, which seemed to have time and space behind them not before them. The lips were delicate and full, and had the look suggesting a smile which the inward thought has stayed. It was like one of the Titian women like a Titian that hangs on the wall of the Gallery at Munich. The head and neck, the whole personality, had an air of distinction and destiny. The drawing had been done by a wandering duchess who had seen the girl sketching in the foothills, when on a visit to that "Wild West" which has such power to refine and inspire minds not superior to Nature. Its replica was carried to a castle in Scotland. It had been the gift of Diana Welldon on a certain day not long ago, when Flood Rawley had made a pledge to her, which was as vital to him and to his future as two thousand dollars were vital to Dan Welldon now.

"You've not been a saint, and Di knows it," repeated the weak brother of a girl whose fame belonged to the West; whose name was a signal for cheerful looks; whose buoyant humour and impartial friendliness gained her innumerable friends; and whose talent, understood by few, gave her a certain protection, lifting her a little away from the outwardly crude and provincial life around her.

When Rawley spoke, it was with quiet deliberation, and even gentleness. "I haven't been a saint, and she knows it, as you say, Dan; but the law is on my side as yet, and it isn't on yours. There's the difference."

"You used to gamble yourself; you were pretty tough, and you oughtn't to walk up my back with hobnailed boots."

"Yes, I gambled, Dan, and I drank, and I raised a dust out here. My record was writ pretty big. But I didn't lay my hands on the ark of the social covenant, whose inscription is, Thou shalt not steal; and that's why I'm poor but proud, and no one's watching for me round the corner, same as you."

Welldon's half-defiant petulance disappeared. "What's done can't be undone." Then, with a sudden burst of anguish: "Oh, get me out of this somehow!"

"How? I've got no money. By speaking to your sister?"

The other was silent.

"Shall I do it?" Rawley peered anxiously into the other's face, and he knew that there was no real security against the shameful trouble being laid bare to her.

"I want a chance to start straight again."

The voice was fluttered, almost whining; it carried no conviction; but the words had in them a reminder of words that Rawley himself had said to Diana Welldon but a few months ago, and a new spirit stirred in him. He stepped forwards and, gripping Dan's shoulder with a hand of steel, said fiercely:

"No, Dan. I'd rather take you to her in your coffin. She's never known you, never seen what most of us have seen, that all you have or nearly all is your lovely looks, and what they call a kind heart. There's only you two in your family, and she's got to live with you awhile, anyhow. She couldn't stand this business. She mustn't stand it. She's had enough to put up with in me; but at the worst she could pass me by on the other side, and there would be an end. It would have been said that Flood Rawley had got his deserts. It's different with you." His voice changed, softened. "Dan, I made a pledge to her that I'd never play cards again for money while I lived, and it wasn't a thing to take on without some cogitation. But I cogitated, and took it on, and started life over again me! Began practising law again barrister, solicitor, notary public at forty. And at last I've got my chance in a big case against the Canadian Pacific. It'll make me or break me, Dan. . . . There, I wanted you to see where I stand with Di; and now I want you to promise me that you'll not leave these rooms till I see you again. I'll get you clear; I'll save you, Dan."

"Flood! Oh, my God, Flood!" The voice was broken.

"You've got to stay here, and you're to remember not to get the funk, even if I don't come before midnight. I'll be here then, if I'm alive. If you don't keep your word but, there, you will." Both hands gripped the graceful shoulders of the miscreant like a vice.

"So help me, Flood," was the frightened, whispered reply, "I'll make it up to you somehow, some day. I'll pay you back."

Rawley caught up his cap from the table. "Steady steady. Don't go at a fence till you're sure of your seat, Dan," he said. Then with a long look at the portrait on the wall, and an exclamation which the other did not hear, he left the room with a set, determined face.

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"Who told you? What brought you, Flood?" the girl asked, her chin in her long, white hands, her head turned from the easel to him, a book in her lap, the sun breaking through the leaves upon her hat, touching the Titian hair with splendour.

"Fate brought me, and didn't tell me," he answered, with a whimsical quirk of the mouth, and his trouble lurking behind the sea-deep eyes.

"Wouldn't you have come if you knew I was here?" she urged archly.

"Not for two thousand dollars," he answered, the look of trouble deepening in his eyes, but his lips were smiling. He had a quaint sense of humour, and at his last gasp would have noted the ridiculous thing. And surely it was a droll malignity of Fate to bring him here to her whom, in this moment of all moments in his life, he wished far away. Fate meant to try him to the uttermost. This hurdle of trial was high indeed.

"Two thousand dollars nothing less?" she inquired gaily. "You are too specific for a real lover."

"Fate fixed the amount," he added drily. "Fate you talk so much of Fate," she replied gravely, and her eyes looked into the distance. "You make me think of it too, and I don't want to do so. I don't want to feel helpless, to be the child of Accident and Destiny."

"Oh, you get the same thing in the 'fore-ordination' that old Minister M'Gregor preaches every Sunday. 'Be elect or be damned,' he says to us all. Names aren't important; but, anyhow, it was Fate that led me here."

"Are you sure it wasn't me?" she asked softly. "Are you sure I wasn't calling you, and you had to come?"

"Well, it was en route, anyhow; and you are always calling, if I must tell you," he laughed. Suddenly he became grave. "I hear you call me in the night sometimes, and I start up and say 'Yes, Di!' out of my sleep. It's a queer hallucination. I've got you on the brain, certainly."

"It seems to vex you certainly," she said, opening the book that lay in her lap, "and your eyes trouble me to-day. They've got a look that used to be in them, Flood, before before you promised; and another look I don't understand and don't like. I suppose it's always so. The real business of life is trying to understand each other."

"You have wonderful thoughts for one that's had so little chance," he said. "That's because you're a genius, I suppose. Teaching can't give that sort of thing the insight."

"What is the matter, Flood?" she asked suddenly again, her breast heaving, her delicate, rounded fingers interlacing. "I heard a man say once that you were 'as deep as the sea.' He did not mean it kindly, but I do. You are in trouble, and I want to share it if I can. Where were you going when you came across me here?"

"To see old Busby, the quack-doctor up there," he answered, nodding towards a shrubbed and wooded hillock behind them.

"Old Busby!" she rejoined in amazement. "What do you want with him not medicine of that old quack, that dreadful man?"

"He cures people sometimes. A good many out here owe him more than they'll ever pay him."

"Is he as rich an old miser as they say?"

"He doesn't look rich, does he?" was the enigmatical answer.

"Does any one know his real history? He didn't come from nowhere. He must have had friends once. Some one must once have cared for him, though he seems such a monster now."

"Yet he cures people sometimes," he rejoined abstractedly. "Probably there's some good underneath. I'm going to try and see."

"What is it. What is your business with him? Won't you tell me? Is it so secret?"

"I want him to help me in a case I've got in hand. A client of mine is in trouble you mustn't ask about it; and he can help, I think I think so." He got to his feet. "I must be going, Di," he added. Suddenly a flush swept over his face, and he reached out and took both her hands. "Oh, you are a million times too good for me!" he said. "But if all goes well, I'll do my best to make you forget it."

"Wait wait one moment," she answered. "Before you go, I want you to hear what I've been reading over and over to myself just now. It is from a book I got from Quebec, called 'When Time Shall Pass'. It is a story of two like

you and me. The man is writing to the woman, and it has things that you have said to me in a different way."

"No, I don't talk like a book, but I know a star in a dark night when I see it," he answered, with a catch in his throat.

"Hush," she said, catching his hand in hers, as she read, while all around them the sounds of summer the distant clack of a reaper, the crack of a whip, the locusts droning, the whirl of a young partridge, the squeak of a chipmunk were tuned to the harmony of the moment and her voice:

"Night and the sombre silence, oh, my love, and one star shining!
First, warm, velvety sleep, and then this quick, quiet waking to
your voice which seems to call me. Is it is it you that calls?
Do you sometimes, even in your dreams, speak to me? Far beneath
unconsciousness is there the summons of your spirit to me? . . .
I like to think so. I like to think that this thing which has come
to us is deeper, greater than we are. Sometimes day and night there
flash before my eyes my mind's eyes pictures of you and me in
places unfamiliar, landscapes never before seen, activities
uncomprehended and unknown, bright, alluring glimpses of some second
being, some possible, maybe never-to-be-realised future, alas! Yet
these swift-moving shutters of the soul, or imagination, or reality
who shall say which?—give me a joy never before felt in life. If
I am not a better man for this love of mine for you, I am more than
I was, and shall be more than I am. Much of my life in the past was
mean and small, so much that I have said and done has been unworthy
my love for you is too sharp a light for my gross imperfections of
the past! Come what will, be what must, I stake my life, my heart,
my soul on you that beautiful, beloved face; those deep eyes in
which my being is drowned; those lucid, perfect hands that have
bound me to the mast of your destiny. I cannot go back, I must go
forwards: now I must keep on loving you or be shipwrecked. I did
not know that this was in me, this tide of love, this current of
devotion. Destiny plays me beyond my ken, beyond my dreams.
"O Cithaeron!" Turn from me now or never, O my love! Loose me
from the mast, and let the storm and wave wash me out into the sea
of your forgetfulness now or never! . . . But keep me, keep me,
if your love is great enough, if I bring you any light or joy; for I
am yours to my uttermost note of life."

"He knew he knew!" Rawley said, catching her wrists in his hands and drawing her to him. "If I could write, that's what I should have said to you, beautiful and beloved. How mean and small and ugly my life was till you made me over. I was a bad lot."

"So much hung on one little promise," she said, and drew closer to him. "You were never bad," she added; then, with an arm sweeping the universe, "Oh, isn't it all good, and isn't it all worth living?"

His face lost its glow. Over in the town her brother faced a ruined life, and the girl beside him, a dark humiliation and a shame which would poison her life hereafter, unless his look turned to the little house where the quack-doctor lived. He loosed her hands.

"Now for Caliban," he said.

"I shall be Ariel and follow you—in my heart," she said. "Be sure and make him tell you the story of his life," she added with a laugh, as his lips swept the hair behind her ears.

As he moved swiftly away, watching his long strides, she said proudly, "As deep as the sea."

After a moment she added: "And he was once a gambler, until, until " she glanced at the open book, then with sweet mockery looked at her hands "until 'those lucid, perfect hands bound me to the mast of your destiny.' O vain Diana! But they are rather beautiful," she added softly, "and I am rather happy." There was something like a gay little chuckle in her throat.

"O vain Diana!" she repeated.

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Rawley entered the door of the but on the hill without ceremony. There was no need for courtesy, and the work he had come to do could be easier done without it.

Old Busby was crouched over a table, his mouth lapping milk from a full bowl on the table. He scarcely raised his head when Rawley entered through the open door he had seen his visitor coming. He sipped on, his straggling beard dripping. There was silence for a time.

"What do you want?" he growled at last.

"Finish your swill, and then we can talk," said Rawley carelessly. He took a chair near the door, lighted a cheroot and smoked, watching the old man, as he tipped the great bowl towards his face, as though it were some wild animal feeding. The clothes were patched and worn, the coat— front was spattered with stains of all kinds, the hair and beard were unkempt and long, giving him what would have been the look of a mangy lion, but that the face had the expression of some beast less honourable. The eyes, however, were malignantly intelligent, the hands, ill—cared for, were long, well—shaped and capable, but of a hateful yellow colour like the face. And through all was a sense of power, dark and almost mediaeval. Secret, evilly wise and inhuman, he looked a being apart, whom men might seek for help in dark purposes.

"What do you want medicine?" he muttered at last, wiping his beard and mouth with the palm of his hand, and the palm on his knees.

Rawley looked at the ominous—looking bottles on the shelves above the old man's head; at the forceps, knives, and other surgical instruments on the walls they at least were bright and clean and, taking the cheroot slowly from his mouth, he said:

"Shin—plasters are what I want. A friend of mine has caught his leg in a trap."

The old man gave an evil chuckle at the joke, for a "shin—plaster" was a money—note worth a quarter of a dollar.

"I've got some," he growled in reply, "but they cost twenty—five cents each. You can have them for your friend at the price."

"I want eight thousand of them from you. He's hurt pretty bad," was the dogged, dry answer.

The shaggy eyebrows of the quack drew together, and the eyes peered out sharply through half—closed lids. "There's plenty of wanting and not much getting in this world," he rejoined, with a leer of contempt, and spat on the floor, while yet the furtive watchfulness of the eyes indicated a mind ill at ease.

Smoke came in placid puffs from the cheroot Rawley was smoking very hard, but with a judicial meditation, as it seemed.

"Yes, but if you want a thing so bad that, to get it, you'll face the devil or the Beast of Revelations, it's likely to come to you."

"You call me a beast?" The reddish-brown face grew black like that of a Bedouin in his rage.

"I said the Beast of Revelations don't you know the Scriptures?"

"I know that a fool is to be answered according to his folly," was the hoarse reply, and the great head wagged to and fro in its smarting rage.

"Well, I'm doing my best; and perhaps when the folly is all out, we'll come to the revelations of the Beast." There was a silence, in which the gross impostor shifted heavily in his seat, while a hand twitched across the mouth, and then caught at the breast of the threadbare black coat abstractedly.

Rawley leaned forward, one elbow on a knee, the cheroot in his fingers. He spoke almost confidentially, as to some ignorant and misguided savage as he had talked to Indian chiefs in his time, when searching for the truth regarding some crime:

"I've had a lot of revelations in my time. A lawyer and a doctor always do. And though there are folks who say I'm no lawyer, as there are those who say with greater truth that you're no doctor, speaking technically, we've both had 'revelations.' You've seen a lot that's seamy, and so have I. You're pretty seamy yourself. In fact, you're as bad a man as ever saved lives and lost them. You've had a long tether, and you've swung on it swung wide. But you've had a lot of luck that you haven't swung high, too."

He paused and flicked away the ash from his cheroot, while the figure before him swayed animal-like from side to side, muttering.

"You've got brains, a great lot of brains of a kind however you came by them," Rawley continued; "and you've kept a lot of people in the West from passing in their cheques before their time. You've rooked 'em, chiselled 'em out of a lot of cash, too. There was old Lamson fifteen hundred for the goitre on his neck; and Mrs. Gilligan for the cancer two thousand, wasn't it? Tincture of Lebanon leaves you called the medicine, didn't you? You must have made fifty thousand or so in the last ten years."

"What I've made I'll keep," was the guttural answer, and the talon-like fingers clawed the table.

"You've made people pay high for curing them, saving them sometimes; but you haven't paid me high for saving you in the courts; and there's one case that you haven't paid me for at all. That was when the patient died and you didn't."

The face of the old man became mottled with a sudden fear, but he jerked it forwards once or twice with an effort at self-control. Presently he steadied to the ordeal of suspense, while he kept saying to himself, "What does he know what which?"

"Malpractice resulting in death that was poor Jimmy Tearle; and something else resulting in death that was the switchman's wife. And the law is hard in the West where a woman's in the case quick and hard. Yes, you've swung wide on your tether; look out that you don't swing high, old man."

"You can prove nothing; it's bluff;" came the reply in a tone of malice and of fear.

Northern Lights, v5

"You forget. I was your lawyer in Jimmy Tearle's case, and a letter's been found written by the switchman's wife to her husband. It reached me the night he was killed by the avalanche. It was handed over to me by the post-office, as the lawyer acting for the relatives. I've read it. I've got it. It gives you away."

"I wasn't alone." Fear had now disappeared, and the old man was fighting.

"No, you weren't alone; and if the switchman and the switchman's wife weren't dead and out of it all; and if the other man that didn't matter any more than you wasn't alive and hadn't a family that does matter, I wouldn't be asking you peaceably for two thousand dollars as my fee for getting you off two cases that might have sent you to prison for twenty years, or, maybe, hung you to the nearest tree."

The heavy body pulled itself together, the hands clinched. "Blackmail— you think I'll stand it?"

"Yes, I think you will. I want two thousand dollars to help a friend in a hole, and I mean to have it, if you think your neck's worth it."

Teeth, wonderfully white, showed through the shaggy beard. "If I had to go to prison or swing, as you say, do you think I'd go with my mouth shut? I'd not pay up alone. The West would crack holy Heaven, I know enough to make it sick. Go on and see! I've got the West in my hand." He opened and shut his fingers with a grimace of cruelty which shook Rawley in spite of himself.

Rawley had trusted to the inspiration of the moment; he had had no clearly defined plan; he had believed that he could frighten the old man, and by force of will bend him to his purposes. It had all been more difficult than he had expected. He kept cool, imperturbable, and determined, however. He knew that what the old quack said was true the West might shake with scandal concerning a few who, no doubt, in remorse and secret fear, had more than paid the penalty of their offences. But he thought of Di Welldon and of her criminal brother, and every nerve, every faculty was screwed to its utmost limit of endurance and capacity.

Suddenly the old man gave a new turn to the event. He got up and, rummaging in an old box, drew out a dice-box. Rattling the dice, he threw them out on the table before him, a strange, excited look crossing his face.

"Play for it," he said in a harsh, croaking voice. "Play for the two thousand. Win it if you can. You want it bad. I want to keep it bad. It's nice to have; it makes a man feel warm money does. I'd sleep in ten-dollar bills, I'd have my clothes made of them, if I could; I'd have my house papered with them; I'd eat 'em. Oh, I know, I know about you and her Diana Welldon! You've sworn off gambling, and you've kept your pledge for near a year. Well, it's twenty years since I gambled twenty years. I gambled with these then." He shook the dice in the box. "I gambled everything I had away more than two thousand dollars, more than two thousand dollars." He laughed a raw, mirthless laugh. "Well, you're the greatest gambler in the West. So was I—in the East. It pulverised me at last, when I'd nothing left and drink, drink, drink. I gave up both one night and came out West.

"I started doctoring here. I've got money, plenty of money medicine, mines, land got it for me. I've been lucky. Now you come to bluff me me! You don't know old Busby." He spat on the floor. "I'm not to be bluffed. I know too much. Before they could lynch me I'd talk. But to play you, the greatest gambler in the West, for two thousand dollars yes, I'd like the sting of it again. Twos, fours, double-sixes the gentleman's game!" He rattled the dice and threw them with a flourish out on the table, his evil face lighting up. "Come! You can't have something for nothing," he growled.

As he spoke, a change came over Rawley's face. It lost its cool imperturbability, it grew paler, the veins on the fine forehead stood out, a new, flaring light came into the eyes. The old gambler's spirit was alive. But even as it rose, sweeping him into that area of fiery abstraction where every nerve is strung to a fine tension, and the surrounding world disappears, he saw the face of Diana Welldon, he remembered her words to him not an hour

before, and the issue of the conflict, other considerations apart, was without doubt. But there was her brother and his certain fate, if the two thousand dollars were not paid in by midnight. He was desperate. It was in reality for Diana's sake. He approached the table, and his old calm returned.

"I have no money to play with," he said quietly. With a gasp of satisfaction, the old man fumbled in the inside of his coat and drew out layers of ten, fifty, and hundred-dollar bills. It was lined with them. He passed a pile over to Rawley two thousand dollars. He placed a similar pile before himself.

As Rawley laid his hand on the bills, the thought rushed through his mind, "You have it keep it!" but he put it away from him. With a gentleman he might have done it, with this man before him, it was impossible. He must take his chances; and it was the only chance in which he had hope now, unless he appealed for humanity's sake, for the girl's sake, and told the real truth. It might avail. Well, that would be the last resort.

"For small stakes?" said the grimy quack in a gloating voice.

Rawley nodded and then added, "We stop at eleven o'clock, unless I've lost or won all before that."

"And stake what's left on the last throw?"

"Yes."

There was silence for a moment, in which Rawley seemed to grow older, and a set look came to his mouth a broken pledge, no matter what the cause, brings heavy penalties to the honest mind. He shut his eyes for an instant, and, when he opened them, he saw that his fellow-gambler was watching him with an enigmatical and furtive smile. Did this Caliban have some understanding of what was at stake in his heart and soul?

"Play!" Rawley said sharply, and was himself again. For hour after hour there was scarce a sound, save the rattle of the dice and an occasional exclamation from the old man as he threw a double-six. As dusk fell, the door had been shut, and a lighted lantern was hung over their heads.

Fortune had fluctuated. Once the old man's pile had diminished to two notes, then the luck had changed and his pile grew larger; then fell again; but, as the hands of the clock on the wall above the blue medicine bottles reached a quarter to eleven, it increased steadily throw after throw.

Now the player's fever was in Rawley's eyes. His face was deadly pale, but his hand threw steadily, calmly, almost negligently, as it might seem. All at once, at eight minutes to eleven, the luck turned in his favour, and his pile mounted again. Time after time he dropped double-sixes. It was almost uncanny. He seemed to see the dice in the box, and his hand threw them out with the precision of a machine. Long afterwards he had this vivid illusion that he could see the dice in the box. As the clock was about to strike eleven he had before him three thousand eight hundred dollars. It was his throw.

"Two hundred," he said in a whisper, and threw. He won.

With a gasp of relief, he got to his feet, the money in his hand. He stepped backward from the table, then staggered, and a faintness passed over him. He had sat so long without moving that his legs bent under him. There was a pail of water with a dipper in it on a bench. He caught up a dipperful of water, drank it empty, and let it fall in the pail again with a clatter.

"Dan," he said abstractedly, "Dan, you're all safe now."

Northern Lights, v5

Then he seemed to wake, as from a dream, and looked at the man at the table. Busby was leaning on it with both hands, and staring at Rawley like some animal jaded and beaten from pursuit. Rawley walked back to the table and laid down two thousand dollars.

"I only wanted two thousand," he said, and put the other two thousand in his pocket.

The evil eyes gloated, the long fingers clutched the pile, and swept it into a great inside pocket. Then the shaggy head bent forwards.

"You said it was for Dan," he said "Dan Welldon?"

Rawley hesitated. "What is that to you?" he replied at last.

With a sudden impulse the old impostor lurched round, opened a box, drew out a roll, and threw it on the table.

"It's got to be known sometime," he said, "and you'll be my lawyer when I'm put into the ground you're clever. They call me a quack. Malpractice bah! There's my diploma James Clifton Welldon. Right enough, isn't it?"

Rawley was petrified. He knew the forgotten story of James Clifton Welldon, the specialist, turned gambler, who had almost ruined his own brother the father of Dan and Diana at cards and dice, and had then ruined himself and disappeared. Here, where his brother had died, he had come years ago, and practised medicine as a quack.

"Oh, there's plenty of proof, if it's wanted!" he said. "I've got it here." He tapped the box behind him. "Why did I do it? Because it's my way. And you're going to marry my niece, and 'll have it all some day. But not till I've finished with it not unless you win it from me at dice or cards. . . . But no" something human came into the old, degenerate face "no more gambling for the man that's to marry Diana. There's a wonder and a beauty!" He chuckled to himself. "She'll be rich when I've done with it. You're a lucky man ay, you're lucky."

Rawley was about to tell the old man what the two thousand dollars was for, but a fresh wave of repugnance passed over him, and, hastily drinking another dipperful of water, he opened the door. He looked back. The old man was crouching forward, lapping milk from the great bowl, his beard dripping. In disgust he swung round again. The fresh, clear air caught his face.

With a gasp of relief he stepped out into the night, closing the door behind him.