

With slow and muffled footfall he stepped to the dark blue blanket which served as a hanging between the two rooms. The chimneys of the two compartments of the hut were built back to back, and a cherry wood fire was burning in the inner room. As he dropped the hanging blanket and paused for a moment in the half gloom Harry could barely distinguish his surroundings by the aid of the sneaky, yellow, flickering flames of the logs. At the farther end stood a rough, low couch covered with buffalo skins, and upon its rich, deep brown shone the white face of a woman who had been beautiful before the agony of hunger had dragged the rounded cheeks into lined and angular forms and had sucked the blood from the cherry red lips. The big gray blue eyes looked nearly black in the dim light, and they stared vacantly. The fingers, white and worn to the bone, lay upon the bearskin which covered her, like wax models of dead hands.

The young man approached the bed as a repentant pilgrim of old might have drawn nigh to the shrine of the enskied saint whose intercession he craved. He looked at her, and his brawny limbs trembled and shook as in a palsy while he pictured to himself the lovely, loving and lovable girl whom he had hoped to call his own and whom the hand of heaven had thus sorely stricken. She moved not on her couch, nor whispered a word, nor drew a breath. But for the slight movement of the bosom and for the barely perceptible tremor of the lips she might have been dead already. The big eyes stared, and Harry thought they stared at him and chided him softly, not harshly. The gaze cut through his heartstrings like a red hot dagger, and he rushed from the room.

"She is dyin!" he cried in his agony. "Ain't thar nuthin at all to eat in the place—nuthin—nor a drink o' whisky—nuthin, nuthin?"

His searching glance traveled around the room unavailing. The shelves were bare.

"Thar ain't a morsel nor a drop, and thar hasn't bin these two days," answered the old man, with a choking voice.

"An she'll die," Harry cried, "if she'll get no food?"

"Yes, die," echoed the pioneer—"die, like Joe an Bill an Dick—an yow an I will follow her."

The young man flew at the cupboard and flung the dishes and plates and bottles and cups and jugs it contained on the floor in a clattering confusion. He dived into every nook; he ransacked every corner; he swept the boards for possible crumbs and turned the bottles for any nourishing drops they might contain. Not a mite, not a atom of food, not a drop of liquor, was there.

Then he took down the rifle which hung on a peg on the wall, and, half naked as he was, he opened the door and walked out into the slush and the snow. The wind, even in its weakened forces, was icy and cut him like a thousand whips. He walked all round the house, but no living thing, no bird or game of any kind, was to be seen, nothing anywhere but the great white pad of snow and the dark brown of the rocks and trees below and the endless gray sky above.

Shivering and trembling, he returned to the hut and closed the door against the glacial blast.

"It ain't no use," he said bitterly. "I knowed it warn't no use, but I thought I'd try."

He sat down for a few minutes in a silent tremor, with his elbows upon the

table and his head upon his hands.

On a sudden he jumped up like one mad. His eyes glowed as with an inspiration that might have been holy.

"By the livin' God," he cried, "yow shall not die, my Nell, my darlin Nell! Yow shall not die of hunger while Painter Harry is alive—no—no—no! Thank God an his mercy that I've thought of it afore it warn't too late."

"What do yow mean? What are yow goin to do?" Hays demanded, looking at him with feverish eyes.

"Don't ask," Harry replied. He gasped for breath between each sentence. "I'll save her, but don't ask. Let me—and say nuthin."

"But I'm dyin, too," whined the old man. "I'm goin blind, an—I'm—help, help!"

The voice became fainter, and the pioneer's wasted form slid from his seat and rolled sideways on the floor.

Harry bent over him and looked into the starving man's face.

Then he rose slowly and haggardly. His lids were tightly closed, and he bit his teeth.

"She first," he said after a slight pause. "My darlin first. I'll save him afterward."

He went to the table and opened the drawer.

As he felt about there for a knife his left hand touched the little piles of golden ore that lay on the table.

With a furious sweep of the hand he sent them flying on the floor.

"Gold!" he cried. "Gold! All the gold in the world ain't worth a crust of bread."

CHAPTER II.

Painter Harry selected the sharpest and the most pointed of the knives he found in the table drawer and took from the shelf, whereon it stood, a big drinking cup made from the horn of a buffalo. Then he gathered up a few strips of the rag he had left lying near by, and after glancing for a brief second at the motionless figure of the old frontiersman he raised the blue blanket curtain and stepped into the inner room.

The girl was lying white and silent as before, with a deathlike, peaceful smile wreathing her parted lips.

Harry stole to the couch and looked into the girl's eyes. A merest gleam of a heartbreak recognition flickered there, like a stray and feeble sunbeam, and vanished. The young man dropped on one knee by the side of his dying bride and, grasping her cold and humid hand, covered it with his kisses.

"Oh, my God," he cried in the terror of his heart, "grant that it may not be too late—grant that it may not be too late!"

He took the knife he had brought, and with one swift and desperate movement cut a great gash in his left arm. The steaming blood spurted over his face and chest, but he dashed the horn cup to the wound with a lightninglike swing, and the hot fluid gushed into it. He felt his face grow red and white by turns, and a strong tremor filled his frame, but he kept a tight hold of the horn until he knew that his blood was trickling into it more and more slowly. Then he satisfied himself that the cup was nearly full to the brim, though his head swam and the walls and the couch and the girl upon it appeared to him to turn round in a hazy whirl. He crept to the couch side with the love of a life beaming in his dark eyes. Gently, tenderly, as a woman might have done, he inserted his right arm beneath the girl's shoulders, and, raising her drooping head with a solicitous care, he held with his left the cup to her lips, though he felt the blood still flowing from his arm in a warm stream. The

half open lips admitted a few drops; then the head sank back as a gasping thrill pervaded the slender frame. Harry softly pressed the cup again to his love's lips, and a few more drops passed.

Then he waited a dozen seconds, while his sight grew dimmer and his temples throbbed as in fever. Again he placed the cup to the white lips, and he was happy to see a few more drops of his life's blood rushing to save her whom he loved so well.

Time after time during the next hour he repeated his work of mercy until at last the glassy eyes brightened with the signs of reviving life and a dim smile beamed there. The cold figure seemed to warm into pulsating vigor, the bosom heaved in more visible evenness, and at last a sigh, long drawn, escaped from it.

Then Harry on a sudden felt all around him grow dark. His wounded arm burned as in a raging fever, and he swayed as he knelt by his Nellie's couch.

"I've done what I could," he muttered. "Goodby, Nellie. Goodby, darlin. Goodby, goodby!"

He stretched out a wildly fumbling hand and fell face foremost on the floor.

The sun of a bright winter morning glowed, an orb of red fire, on a horizon of silver, which graduated westward into a pale, steely blue.

Around the hut where Painter Harry lay horses neighed and pawed the snowy ground, while the air was astir with cheery human voices.

A score of Uncle Sam's dragoons, unrecognizable as soldiers under the oddest and most varied assortment of fur clothing, tramped up and down by the tethered horses, swinging their arms and stamping their feet to keep their limbs warm in the keen and biting brisk atmosphere.



Raising her drooping head with solicitous care.

Within three or four men, two of them in the uniform of officers of the United States cavalry, were busy attending to the needs of poor Nellie, who sat, pale and shamefaced, on her couch, looking with frightened gazelle eyes at her lover, whose wounds one of the men was dressing.

"A fine fellow that, doctor!" exclaimed a boisterous lieutenant of dragoons. "I wonder how he came by that gash in the arm. The place is swimming in blood. Is he all right?"

"Right as rain," the surgeon replied. "He hasn't poisoned his constitution with whisky of late. He'll be up and doing in a day or two."

"And the old man?" asked the officer. "There's life in the old dog for many a day to come yet. But don't you go

and feed him with rancid pork and molasses. A stomach that's been starving for a week or two can't stand that."

The story of Painter Harry's cordial is told to this day by many a pioneer's fireside out west.

The gold which Harry discovered at such an awful cost did not ruffle the even tenor of his and Nellie's homely lives.

THE END.

FIVE YEARS.

By OPIE READ.

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CHAPTER I.

"You are a pretty looking thing to talk about marrying, Charles. Oh, you are a fine specimen of matrimonial achievement! Marry my daughter! Why, both of you would starve in less than a year. You are 18 years old and able to support a wife, eh? Eighteen years old indeed! Why, sir, when I was of that age, I no more thought of marrying than I thought of swallowing a tenpenny nail."

"It was probably because you had never loved any one," the young fellow replied, looking down with an embarrassed air.

"Loved any one!" The old gentleman blew his nose. "Loved any one at 18! Why, sir, if my father had awakened in the middle of the night and the belief that I was in love with some one had entered his mind, he would have hopped out of bed, seized a board and fanned me until I would have thought the 10th of January was the 4th of July. Loved any one! Why don't you call up the dogs and go out and catch some rabbits? Is that your top string hanging out of your pocket? Only your handkerchief? Excuse me. My eyesight is not so good as it used to be, but my judgment is a thundering sight better. Love at 18! Charles, of course you are always welcome at my house, and I don't want to hurry you off, but, confound it, go home!"

"Then you say I shall not marry Ermance?"

"Not at the present writing, whose few lines may find you enjoying the same blessing, Charles. I don't know what may occur in the future, but I am pretty sure of what is happening now."

"Will you let us be engaged, then?"

"Oh, yes; be engaged as much as you please!"

"May heaven bless you, sir."

"Now, here, young man! You are not on the stage. The fellow who used to be so good at saying 'May heaven bless you, sir,' is now working on a flatboat."

"But I desire to thank you for your great kindness."

"Yes; that's all right."

"Ermance and I can see each other daily?"

"Well, hardly. You must understand now that I want no lovemaking round here. I have a touch of rheumatism and can't stand it. I am somewhat peculiar about my own affairs, which eccentricity I hope to be joined. If you agree to go away and remain five years, why, at the end of that time you may come back and marry the girl. Do you agree?"

"I suppose I must."

"Well, run along, then."

"I don't like for you to talk to me as though I were a child."

"As though you were a child, eh? Well, run along now! Ermance is out in the garden somewhere giggling. Find her, plight your troth and hurry away."