

of paper thrice folded into letter form. Opening the note by matchlight, he found this message:

"Please stay in the shack tonight, and in the morning come to the house again when you see a little flag flying from the back porch."

"Freda Norton."

Mowbray threw himself upon his hay bed to think the thing out. A day that had begun as tamely as any for a fortnight past was closing in bewilderment. In that strange mood that comes upon one in the face of something imminent but unknown, he thought over the facts of his present condition and the things that had led up to it.

Six weeks before, in his own office in Winnipeg, a couple of his fellow-practitioners had said to him: "Get out of the city. You're pretty near played out, and before you try to cure any more folks you've got to cure yourself. Get off to the woods." He had taken their advice and, with only a pony and a dunnage-bag for his travelling equipment, and with no definite plan for his journey, had set out in quest of a holiday. Almost aimlessly he had since crossed on horseback the wide plains of three provinces and was now in the bush-country of Western Alberta. He had been going as he pleased, stopping for a day here and there, camping at times on the road, sauntering always. It had been good fun and good medicine; but his holiday thus far had been lacking in that personal excitement which sometimes does a tired man more good than rest. It now looked as though he had found that too and, for the first time in half a year he went to sleep with an eager expectancy for the morrow.

It was full day when he awoke. Stopping only to let out the pony and tether him in the field, he hurried to the brow of the hill, there to await the signal from the house. What it might mean he could not know; but he was under orders. An hour he waited, with unaccustomed patience, and then from the porch at the rear of the house there fluttered a little red and white flag.

Freda Norton came from the house as he drew near it, and stood under the big balm-trees, where he had first seen her. She fitted perfectly into the morning view and very pleasingly, too, confessed Mowbray to himself, into the mystery that seemed to be weaving around him. There was color in her face and an eagerness in her eyes that he was sure had not been there the night before; and this same eagerness showed also in the first words she spoke.

"My father is sleeping now, and I must talk with you before he wakes. But first, are you willing to help me?"

"You need not ask it. Tell me how."

It was her voice, Mowbray knew now, that had somehow moved him and was at this moment compelling his own words. There was a hidden depth in it, a rich softness that, though she spoke rapidly and low, seemed to come from some inner well of feeling. It had, too, a trace of anxiety and perhaps something of doubt as, with a sudden flush on her face, she went on.

"Why I am saying this to you, whom I had never seen until a few hours ago, I do not know, except that I somehow feel it right to do so. You saw my father last night and thought he was ill. He is ill, though I said he wasn't, and I am determined upon trying a cure. I must go back a little to make you understand."

"Two years ago, while clearing some land up the lake, Dad was knocked down by a falling tree, which hit him a crushing blow on the head and stunned him nearly to death. He has lived under a cloud ever since. People say he is crazy, and I know we have a bad reputation among the settlers, for they avoid us."

"During the last year his trouble has taken a new turn that grows out of his former life. Before we came here from Ontario—just the three of us—Dad was a high school principal and much given to the study of philosophy. Since coming west he has kept up his reading fairly well, even here in the woods, and after the accident, which left him none the worse physically, he gave more attention than ever to his favorite study."

But his thinking no longer runs smoothly, and latterly, perhaps from too much brooding over it, his hobby has become a mania. At times he works himself, despite all I can do, into very agony over his perplexities."

"For nearly a year now he has been troubled by what he calls the 'Quest of the Unusual.' I won't try to tell you what he means by this, except that he desires to find the source and centre of all that is above the ordinary in human life. What it is that makes things wonderful and unusual is his problem. He has latterly become convinced that he cannot solve this problem alone—the search for the Unusual needs someone to help him. It worries him that he cannot get such a helper; no one cares for or appreciates the Unusual, he thinks, and alone he cannot find its source. I have tried to humor him in this, as in everything else, but not to much purpose, for he always says I am only a woman."

"Now it happened that yesterday his melancholy was worse than it has been. He sat and brooded all day, and I could not comfort him. Then suddenly you came upon us. In his depression he greeted you, I am afraid, not very kindly. But you remember what you said—that you were 'looking for something unusual'? The word caught him, of course, and I myself wondered for a moment if you knew. But he wasn't able to endure the thought, or perhaps, as it may have seemed, the apparition, and he left you abruptly."

"All night he was distressed, even to walking the floor and beating his hands. He is sleeping now but is likely to waken soon."

"Your remark, whether you meant anything by it or not, has had a strange effect on him—I don't know just what. As soon as you spoke the word I saw that he had caught at it and that he was very deeply moved by it. It has aggravated his melancholy, for I think he feels as if that which he is searching for is now pursuing himself. He has probably forgotten about you by this time, but the impression remains."

"I asked you to stay near us and to help us, for I felt the time had come for a cure—that was the effect of your appearance on myself, though I may be as badly deluded about it as poor Dad. Your reference to the very thing that is troubling him made me think that perhaps you could help. Stranger though you are, I must ask you. I have read that in cases of mind trouble like this a sudden shock will sometimes make right again, and that is what I am now building my hope on."

"When Dad wakens presently, he will take up again the burden of his search. Very likely he will cry out, as he did at intervals all night, for a man to help him. If you would then suddenly surprise him, appearing as if in answer to his cry and announcing yourself as also a searcher for the Unusual, I believe it would help him greatly; and then if you would talk with him quietly along the same line it would perhaps put his mind nearer right again than it has been for a long time. I tried this myself a few weeks ago and it nearly succeeded, but then I was a woman—he wants a man helper. I will go to the house now and will call you when he wakens. This is a strange request to make of you, but will you help me?"

"Yes, I will help you," answered Mowbray huskily.

For half an hour he was left to his own thoughts. They were not hopeful. Well he knew that it would be a slight cure by any such treatment as that proposed. The sick man's daughter was building bravely, but not substantially, upon a very slender chance. A shock might restore mental balance, it was true, but not so light a one as this. It would need to be a physical shock, as severe perhaps as the one that had caused the injury, and even that would depend very much upon the circumstances. He had known of cases in which a blow on the head had pressed the bone upon the brain, and another blow afterward had released the pressure. But if this were the trouble with Norton, his daughter's cure would come very far short.

Nevertheless he would do as she wished; for surely she had earned the



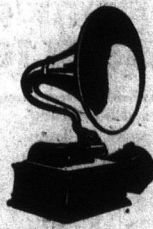
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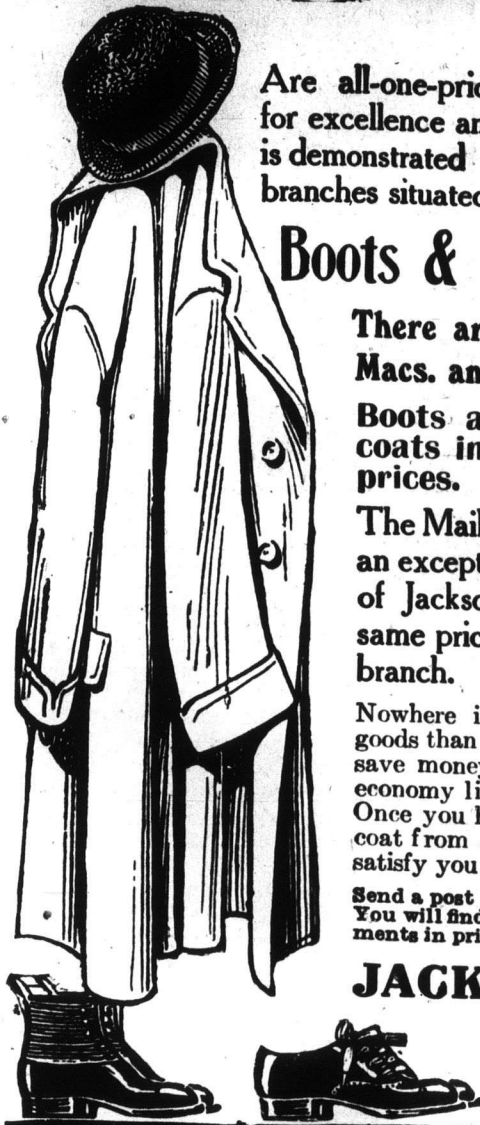
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