

UNQUENCHABLE FIRE.

Or, The Tragedy of the Wild.

CHAPTER I.

Every corner of the earth has a story to tell; every hill, every valley, every river and plain, every tree, and every blade of grass.

What wealth of narrative must be hidden in the heart of the Rocky Mountains of Canada, if only man would give ear to it. We gaze up from the prairie-lands and quail at the sight of the mighty snow-girt ramparts, where sheer to the lowering clouds the crystal heights rise and plunge their jagged heads into a blinding sea of mist. But the Voice of Nature is hushed to our listless ears. The echo of the hills is a whisper to those upon the plains. From the forest lands of British Columbia it is the same, only the scene is of a different tone. The crystal gives place to an almost unbroken carpet of primeval forests, crowned by glaciers which are aged by tens of thousands of years. And here again we wait vainly for the Voice which is forever telling the story of the Wild.

The Voice of Nature only speaks to those who brave all dangers and seek the bosom of that world of tremendous solitude. Beneath the canopy of brooding forest; upon the mountain-side where the crisp surface of the snow remains unbroken. Deep in the canons and valleys where in summer the devastating torrents flow; upon the brink of abyss, gaping to the bowels of the earth, and upon the face of unmeasured precipice. There where the cry of wolf wails out on moonlit night and changes the silence from a peaceful calm to the stillness of gloomy portent. There where the grizzly leisurely prowls, truculent, insolent. There where deer forage browsing or are hunted, where the mountain lion reigns in his exalted lair, where the puma screams in answer to the challenge of the wild-cat. It is there that all who have ears to hear may listen to the wonderful story Nature has to tell.

The seasons come and go; the valleys are green, they are brown with autumn hues, they are white with the snows of winter. The rivers rush headlong to the plains below, or are frozen down to their very beds; the pine forests darken the lower landscape with their everlasting earth-green foliage, or bear on their spiky bosoms the weighty pall of winter. In the heart of the mountains it is the same to-day as it has been for thousands of years. The ramparts bar the way to the march of civilization; within is a world where Nature reigns supreme.

And he who sojourns in the heart of the Wild, and lives in communion with the Spirit which pervades the Northland, knows a strange and awesome life. As it is with the world about him, so it is with him. Civilization loses its meaning; for the voice of the world of men cannot penetrate the ancient watch-towers of the earth. The peace or war nations is less than the battle of wing and fur. Only does he know the animal world, over which he seeks to rule with the law of trap and gun, and the war he wages with the stormy elements of his kingdom. He returns to the primitive man, strong, patient, enduring.

He listens to the Voice of Nature, and quickly learns the tongue in which she speaks; for the cobwebs of cities fall from his brain as the autumn leaves fall from the trees, and the man stands forth like the tree-trunk, plain, rugged, but strong to withstand the storms of mountain life which rage about him.

High up on the hillside, where the forest shadows are lost some distance below, overlooking a valley so deep and wide as to daze the brain of the gazing human, stands a squat building. It seems to have been crushed into the slope by the driving force of the vicious storms to which it is open on three sides. There is no shelter for it. It stands out bravely to sunshine and storm alike, with the contemptuous indifference of familiarity. It is a dug-out, and, as its name implies, is built half in the ground. Its solitary door and single parchment-covered window face over the valley, and the white path in front, where the snow is packed hard by the tramp of dogs and men, and the runners of the dog-sled. Below the slope bears away to the woodlands. Above the hut the overshadowing mountain rises to dazzling heights; and a further, but thin, belt of primeval forest extends up, up, until the eternal snows are reached, and the air will no longer support life. Even to the hardy hunters, whose home this is, those upper

forests are sealed chapters in Nature's story.

The immediate front is a valley, wide and deep, so vast that its contemplation from the hillside sends a shudder of fear through the heart. It is dark, dreadfully dark and gloomy, although the great stretch of pine forest which reaches to its uttermost confines, bears upon its drooping branches the white coat of winter.

The valley is split by a river, now frozen to its bed, but, from the hut door, the rift which marks its course cannot be seen. In summer it is a raging torrent whose voice comes up the hillside in a steady, dull roar. But now it is silent, captive, eating out its heart at the cruel restraint thus ignobly put upon it. But its day will come again, and then it will vent its spleen and hatred upon all life within reach, tearing out its bank, uprooting trees which have withstood a thousand storms, and tossing them upon its turbulent bosom like playthings.

What a world to gaze upon! What splendor! What sublime solitude! And Nature's story is waited upon the chill air, and the man who dwells in such a region must listen, and listening must understand.

Right here he knows is one of the ancient battle-grounds of Nature's forces. If he be imaginative he will try to conceive the dread conflict of elements which must have endured to have caused such masses to be hurled from the depths below. The strangely weird mould of the vast crags must cause him wonder. How came they in such shapes? Surely no water action can have cut them out; no storms of countless ages have chiselled them. Power, might inconceivable to the brain of man, must have moved them in the battle of Nature; and what terrible chaos must have reigned.

And the valley seems limited; seems to be cut off abruptly in every direction; and yet miles of it lie within view. It is the vastness of the towering walls which deceives the human estimation of size. Miles became insignificant. Besides, the valley does not end at these apparent walls. Dark lines score them, which, in the distance, appear like giant, forest-lined cracks; and each such break is the mouth of a yawning valley, as large as, and perhaps larger than the one from which it opens out. And so this mountain world is made up; crag and vale, river and forest, gorge and precipice. Forest, forest everywhere, and above all the cold, gleaming glacial ocean, half buried in the mists of laden clouds and everlasting snow.

And in the awesome view no life is revealed. The forests shadow the earth and every living thing upon it, and where the forest is not, there lies the snow to the depth of many feet. All is still, unending, and the solemn grandeur which belongs to Nature's Wild.

And out of the deathly stillness comes a long-drawn sigh. It echoes down the hillside like the weary expression of patient suffering from some creature imprisoned where ancient glacier and everlasting snows hold place. It passes over the low-pitched roof of the dug-out, it plays about the angles and under the wide-reaching eaves. It sets the door creaking with a sound that startles the occupants of the place. It passes on and forces its way through the dense, complaining forest trees below. The opposition it receives intensifies its plaint and it rushes angrily through the branches. Then, for a while, all is still again.

But the coming of the breath of the mountain-top has made a difference in the outlook. A something strange has happened. One looks about and cannot tell what it is. It may be that the air is colder; it may be that the daylight has changed its tone; it may be that the sunlit scene is changed as the air fills with sparkling, diamond frost particles.

Something has happened. Suddenly a dismal howl splits the air, and its echo intensifies the gloom. Another howl succeeds it, and then the weird cry is taken up by other voices.

And ere the echoes die out another breath comes down from the hilltop, a breath less patient; angry with a biting fierceness which speaks of patience exhausted and a spirit of retaliation.

It catches up the snow as it comes and hurls it defiantly at every obstruction with the viciousness of an exasperated woman. Now it shakes the whole building of the dugout, and as it passes on, shrieks invective at the world over which it rushes, and everything it touches feels the bitter lash of it.

ping snow it bears upon its bosom. Again come the strange howls of the animal world, but they sound more distant and the echoes are muffled, for those who cry out have sought the woodland shelter, where the mountain breath beats itself upon the upstanding giants of

fresh clouds and rush to the scene's direction. Encountering each other on their way they struggle together, each intent of interference, until the shriek is heard on every hand, and the snow fog thickens, and the dull sun above grows duller, and the fierce-burning "dogs" look like evil coals of fire burning luridly in the sky.

Now, from every direction, the wind tears along in a mad fury. The forest tops sway as with the roll of some sea swept by the sudden blast of a tornado. In the rage of the storm the woodland giants creak out their impotent protests. The wind battles and tears at everything; there is no cessation in its onslaught. There is a madness in the struggle which is incomprehensible, and paralyzes the limited human senses.

And as the fight waxes the fog rises, and a grey darkness settles over the valley. The forest is hidden, the hills are gone, the sun is obscured, and a fierce desolation reigns. Darker and darker it becomes as the blizzard gains force. And the cries of the forest beasts add to the chaos and din of the mountain storm.

Those in the dugout feel its force, and its bitter influence drives them to pile up the fuel in the box stove, which alone makes life possible when such a storm breaks. The roof groans, and the two men who sit under it can see it bend beneath the blast. Under the rattling door a thin carpet of snow has edged its way in, while through the crack above it a steady rain of moisture falls as the snow encounters the rising heat of the stifling atmosphere.

"I knew it 'ud come, Nick," observed one of the men, as he snuggled the stove, after carefully packing several cordwood sticks within its insatiable maw.

He was of medium height but of large muscle. His appearance was that of a man in the prime of life. A face weather-tanned, and lined with the strain of exposure. His hair was long and grey, as was the beard which curled about his chin. He was clad in a shirt of rough-tanned buckskin and trousers of thick moleskin. His feet were shod with moccasins which were brilliantly beaded, and matched the adornment on the front of his weatherproof shirt.

His companion was younger, but not much. He was a larger man too, and the resemblance he bore to his comrade indicated the relationship between them. They were brothers.

(To be continued.)

THE BLACK BOG.

A Corner of the County of Kildare Dear to Those Who Know It.

The black bog of Kilbarron, in the County of Kildare, Ireland, lies five long miles from either railway or post office and is considered to be at the "back of beyant entirely."

There are three styles of dwellings in the black bog, says the Rosary Magazine, houses, cottages and cabins. The houses are quaint, rambling edifices, owned by the farmers, who still hold to olden styles and ancient ways unmindful of the great modern note which is sweeping through Ireland to-day.

The cottages belong to the Government and are rented to laborers at a very low rate; while the cabins are simply relics of the old regime, just clay huts roofed with straw. There are very few of the latter standing in Ireland now.

The black bog is a dangerous place for nightly rambles, as it abounds in deep holes full of inky water. But some warm summer evening after sunset, when the fogs are rising all around, go down there all you who are city tired, and find out how good that springy sod will feel to your cramped feet.

Try a short Marathon along those short pathways, you who are weary of life's treadmill, and see if you do not get to feeling like a young colt just let loose in a clover pasture. Or some misty day in October go down there among the brown heather and let the long, clean, wet winds blow the furrows from your fore head while the rain-drops are pattering on the bracken like the wee feet of the fairies themselves.

Always enchanting, always beautiful, even if it is at "the back of beyant," the charm of the bog will twine itself round you with a lure strong enough to gack to the bog for evermore.

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