

punch he brewed as they sat around the fire that evening, the healthier spirit might have endured—perhaps through the winter.

One glass, however, small at that, was sufficient to loose the spirit of wantonness which had made her first the plague, then a thorn in the flesh of the forts. Sipping it—so slowly that she was able to drink without refilling to Gabriel's last toast—her mischievous glance wandered between him and a cluster of pale winter berries that Luke had hung above the hearth in lieu of mistletoe. As he called the toast, moreover, "The old home, old folks, old friends," she rose and standing under the mistletoe in the glow of the fire which wrapped her ripe beauty in a red mantle, she looked at him over the top of her glass: "And old loves."

As aforesaid, exercise and good cheer had brought Gabriel a healthier mood early in the day, but the associations of that hearth were too strong to be long banished. While the invisible vapours of thought were settling again upon him, the liquor had been at work weakening the will power which had reined his passion. The flushes that had followed her sly glances now merged in a burst of feeling. Springing up, he forced her head back and, holding her throat with one powerful hand, crushed his lips upon the scarlet mouth, smothering her broken cry. Despite her struggles, he kissed and kissed and kissed until, exhausted, she hung limp as a dead deer across his arm. Then, lifting her upon her feet, he looked quietly on while, turning, she stared at Luke with eyes that seemed to spread like storm-fed pools across her face's whiteness.

THROUGH all Luke had looked on with a sickly smile, the shamed grin which accentuates the cowardly discomfiture it seeks to excuse and conceal. "Christmas license," he now began, was going on to excuse the rape of her lips when she stopped him with a sudden swinging blow that bathed his mouth in blood. And as, with a wild cry: "You dog! Oh, you slinking dog!" she flew across the floor to her bedroom, it was borne in upon Gabriel that, despite the restless devil behind her coquetries, she had been loyal in thought.

"Just a bit of temper." As Luke's eyes came back from the closed door, his bloody mouth drew into a second uneasy grin. "Let's finish the punch."

But giving him a look that caused his soft eyes to seek the floor, Gabriel flung outside—to pace it in company with thoughts that would no longer be denied, to thrill to vivid remembrances of the soft velvet of her lips, to fling wide arms to the embrace of the black storm, to glow, later, at the vision which formed in the frozen darkness of his cabin, the vision which took form in purpose next day, the purpose that sent him flying outside when, in the forenoon, he saw through thin drift Lourdes come out to draw water at the ice-bound well.

He had often helped her draw, but as, on his approach, she stayed the frosty windlass, he saw in her eyes a reflection of his purpose. "I am to come to your cabin?" Her laugh, repeating his words, rang sharp as the broken icicles that tinkled down the well. Her answer, "Come tell that to my husband," carried neither anger nor reprobation. She laughed again as he spoke.

"Very well. Leave the pails. We need water in my cabin."

It is a habit of writers to blacken much paper with vivid descriptions of deadly occasions, but, according to Gabriel's report, the following scene could not have passed more quietly had it witnessed the simple transfer of a maid from one to another service. On their entrance Luke looked

up from his chair by the fire, revealing glazed bloodshot eyes that told of his attempts to drown his shame. A single fitful glance conveyed his full knowledge that the fear which had dogged him these long weeks now stood openly at his hearth.

"He says that I must go to his cabin?"

Ensued a long pause, and as she stood, looking down upon the other, Gabriel felt once more that if he would rise to his manhood, she would fight at his side. But—with a knife in his belt, his gun close to his hand—he continued his drunken stare at the fire, the bulk of him relaxed in a huddled heap; and Gabriel saw the dark doubt, the troubled question of her look wiped out by immeasurable scorn. Turning, she brought her clothing out of the bedroom, but he did not look up then, or when, having tied her bundle, she followed Gabriel out of the cabin.

AND now must be set down that which may seem impossible to all but the priest whose vocation it is to fathom the incomprehensibilities of human nature. Who shall measure the passion of shame which could cause the poltroon who had quietly suffered the theft of his wife to rise above his cowardly fear and advance his hand against his own life? As, having crossed the fort yard, Lourdes stepped over Gabriel's threshold, a muffled report drove through the drift to their ears. So sure was Gabriel that the shot had been aimed at himself, he let the water pails fall with a clatter as he whirled around. But the door which he had closed behind him loomed through the drift, a blank face whose wooden immobility yet contained a hint of the tragedy it concealed. While rapidly retracing his steps, Gabriel was aware—vividly as though he had already seen it—of the figure stretched at length across the hearth.

The bullet had pierced both temples. On his knees beside him, Gabriel felt of the wounds, nor has Mr. Temple's explanation that bullets have been known to glance and travel around the head beneath the skin, been able to shake my faith in his testimony. The man was surely dead.

In his haste, Gabriel had not noticed that Lourdes had followed; was unaware of her presence until, looking up as she spoke, he caught the bitter hardness of her look.

"He was a dog."

She even spurned him. It was her hands, moreover, that lashed him in his buffalo robes for winter burial. When, late in the afternoon, the drift lifted for an hour, she followed the dog sled that bore him over the blank snowscape to the twin spruces which grew a half mile north of the fort. Her weight was thrown with Gabriel's upon the rawhide ropes which pulled the springy tops down to the ground. She helped to lash him there in his hammock of skins. It was her knife that freed the trees to rise with their grisly burden above the snows. Through all her face had maintained its fixed hardness, only, returning, her dark eyes turned curiously upon Gabriel. As, that evening, she moved around his cabin cooking the meal which neither ate; when, later, they drew up to the fire and fell to a gloomy study of the coals, he felt her glance touch, enwrap him with dark question, which presently merged in knowledge; knowledge of the mind he was to lay bare to me at La Passe three days thereafter.

Though she was there at his fire, the sough of the storm in the chimney, rattle of door and window, wail of the wind outside, were inseparably associated with the long days, longer nights, they had spent at that other hearth. Now, as then, a third sat between them—a figure thin, impalpable, yet so real that did Gabriel but



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