

# "BELA"

## CHAPTER IV.

The girl turned an indifferent, wall-eyed face toward the fire, refusing to look at any of the men. Her beauty grew upon them momentarily. Their amazement knew no bounds that one like this should have been led to their door out of the night.

"Well," said Big Jack, breaking the silence at last. "It was a rough welcome we gave you, miss. We thought you was a spook or something, like that. But we're glad to see you."

She gave no sign of having heard him.

"Was it you who whistled through the keyhole and tossed a stone down the chimney?" demanded Husky.

No answer was forthcoming.

"I'm sorry if we hurt you," added Jack.

He might as well have been addressing a wooden woman.

"I say, I'm sorry if we hurt you," he repeated louder.

"Maybe she can't understand English," suggested Sam.

"What 'I do then?" asked Jack hopelessly.

"Try her with sign language."

"Sure," said Jack. He looked around for the table. "Oh, hell, it's burnt up! We'll have to eat on the floor. Hey, look sister!"

Through the motions of spreading a table and eating, the others watched interestedly. "Will you?" he asked.

She gravely nodded her head. A cheer went up from the circle.

"Hey, cookie!" cried Big Jack. "Toss up a bag of biscuits and put your coffee-pot on. You, Joe, chase out to the stable and fetch a box for her to sit on."

For the next few minutes the cabin presented a scene of great activity. Every man, with the tail of an eye on the guest, was anxious to contribute a share to the preparations.

Husky went to the lake for water; Shand cut bacon and ground coffee for the cook; Big Jack produced a clean, or fairly clean, white blanket to serve for a tablecloth and the table.

Yet their smiles upon their visitor had a shade of double meaning. A glitter in each man's eyes suggested that his hospitality was not entirely disinterested. They were inclined to bristle at each other. Clearly a dangerous amount of electricity was being stored within the little shack. Only Sam was as self-contained in his way as the girl in hers.

Big Jack continued his efforts to communicate with her. He was deluded by the idea that if he talked a kind of pidgin-English and shouted loud enough she must understand.

"Alec, Big Jack," he explained; "him, Black Shand; him, Husky; him, Young Joe. You?" He pointed to her questioningly.

"Bela," she said.

It was the first word she had uttered. Her voice was like a strain of woods music. At the sound of it Sam looked up from his flour. He quickly dropped his eyes again.

When Joe brought her the box to sit on, he lingered beside her. Good-looking Young Joe was a boasted conqueror of the sex. The least able of them all to control his emotions, he was now doing the outrageously masculine. He strutted, poked, and smirked in a way highly offensive to the other men.

When Bela sat down Joe put a hand on her shoulder. Instantly Big Jack's pale face flamed like an aurora.

"Keep your distance!" he barked. "Do you think the rest of us will stand for that?"

"Ah! I've got the same show as any of you, haven't I?" snarled Joe. Big Jack dropped the knives and forks and rose. "Well, we'll decide that right now if you want," he said grimly.

"And, by George, you'll have to take me on after him!" growled Shand from the other side of the fire. Whatever tongue she spoke, any woman should have understood the purport of the scene. Yet this strange girl never raised an eyelid.

Joe retreated to the bed, crestfallen and snarling, and things smoothed down for the moment.

"Where do you live?" Jack asked the girl, illustrating with elaborate pantomime.

She merely shook her head. They might decide as they chose whether she did not understand or did not mean to tell.

Husky came in with a pail of water. The sanguine Husky was almost as visibly ardent as Joe. He rummaged in his bag at the far end of the cabin and reappeared in the firelight bearing an orange silk handkerchief. His intention was unmistakable.

"You put that up, Husky!" came an angry voice from the head. "If I've got to stay away from her, you've got to too!"

Husky turned, snarling. "I guess this is mine, ain't it? I can give it away if I want."

"Not if I know!" cried Joe, springing toward him. They faced each other in the middle of the room with bared teeth.

Big Jack rose again. "Put it away, Husky," he commanded. "This is a free field and no favor. If you want to push yourself forward at our expense, you got to settle with us first, see?"

The others loudly approved of this. Husky, disgruntled, thrust the handkerchief in his pocket.

After the two overweening spirits had been rebuked, matters in the shack went quietly for a while. The four men watched the girl, full of wonder, meanwhile each kept an eye on his mates.

It was their first experience at close range with a girl of the country, and they could not make her out at all. Her sole interest seemed to be upon the fire. The air of indifference at once provoked and baffled them. They could not reconcile it with the implications she had played.

They could not understand a girl alone in a crowd of men betraying no self-consciousness. Touch me at you, peril, she seemed to say; but if that was the way she felt, what had she come for?

Sam brought his basin of flour to the hearth and, kneeling in the firelight, proceeded to mix the dough. After the manner of amateur cooks, he liberally plastered his hands and arms with the sticky mess.

The girl watched him with a scornful lip. Suddenly she dropped to her knees beside him, and without so much as by your leave, took the basin out of his hands. She showed him how it ought to be done, flouring her hands so the batter would not stick, and tossing up the mess with the light deft touch of long experience.

At the sight of Sam's discomfiture a roar of laughter went up from the others.

"Guess you're out of a job now, cookie!" said Shand.

"Now we'll have something to eat besides lead sinkers," added Joe.

Sam laughed with the others, and retiring a little, watched how she did it. The girl affected him differently from the rest. Diffidence overcame him. He scarcely ever raised his eyes to her face.

All watched her delightedly, each man showing it according to his nature. In every move she was as graceful as a kitten or a filly, or anything young, natural, and unconscious of itself.

In a remarkably short space of time the three frying-pans were upended before the fire, each with its loaf. No need to ask if it was going to be good bread. It appeared that this wonderful girl had other recommendations beside her beauty.

She rose, dusting her hands, and backed away from the fire, as if to cool off. Before they realized what she was doing, she turned and quietly walked out of the door, closing it after her.

They cried out in dismay, and of one accord sprang up and made for the door. Sam involuntarily ran with the others, filled, like they were, with disappointment. It was now pitch dark under the trees, and straight from the fire as they were, they could not see a yard ahead.

They scattered, beating the woods, loudly calling her name and making naive promises to the night, if she would only come back. They collided with each other and, tripping over roots, measured their lengths on the ground.

Curses began to be mixed with their dulcet invitations to the vanished one to return. From the sounds, one would have been justified in thinking a part of bedlam had been let loose in the pine-woods.

Sam was the first to take sober second thought. He began to retract his steps toward the cabin. Common sense told him she would never be caught by that noisy crew unless she wished to be. In any case, the bread might as well be saved.

In his heart he approved of her retreat. Trouble in the shack could not long have been averted if she had stayed. Perhaps she had been better aware of what was going on than she seemed. What a strange visitation it had been altogether! How beautiful she was, and how mysterious! Much too good for that lot. It pleased him to think that she was honest. He had not known what to think before.

Thus ruminating he came to the cabin door, and was pulled up short on the threshold by a fresh shock of astonishment. There she was, kneeling on the hearth as before!

She glanced indifferently at him over her shoulder, and went on with her work. Such hardihood in face of human noise outside did not seem human. Sam stared at her open-mouthed. She had some birds that she was skinning and cutting up. The pungent, appetizing smell of wild fowl greeted his nostrils.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed, involuntarily. "What does this mean?"

She disdained any answer.

"You were foolish not to beat it while you had a chance," he said, forgetting she was supposed not to understand. "This is no place for a woman!"

She glanced at him with a subtle smile. Sam flushed up. "Oh, very well," he said, hotly. Turning, he called outside. "Boys, come back! She's here!"

One by one they straggled in, grinning delightedly, if somewhat sheepishly. They shook their heads at each other. We sure have a queer customer, was the general feeling. It was useless to bombard her with questions. The language of signs was a feeble means of communication when one side is intractable.

Apparently she had merely gone to some cache of her own to obtain a contribution toward the feast. She had brought half a dozen grouse. The biscuits loaves were now done sufficiently to stand alone, and the pans were giving off delicious emanations of frying grouse and bacon.

The four men who, for the past week, had been sunk in utter boredom, naturally reacted to the other extreme of hilarity. Loud laughter filled the cabin. The potentialities for trouble were not, however, lessened. On the contrary, a look or a word was enough at any moment to bring a snarling pair face to face. Presently the inevitable suggestion was brought forth.

"This is going to be a regular party," cried Joe. "Jack, be a sport; get out a bottle, and let's do it in style!"

To save himself, Sam could not keep back the protest that sprang to his lips. "For God's sake!" he cried, "What the hell is it to you, cook?"

cried Joe, curiously. There was old bad blood between these two. Perhaps because they were of the same age.

Big Jack was bursar and commissary of the expedition. He smiled and gave his mouth a preliminary wipe.

"Well, I think we might stand one bottle," he said.

Sam shrugged and held his tongue.

Jack returned with one of the precious bottles they had contrived to

smuggle past the police at the Landing. He opened it with loving care, and the four partners had an appetizer.

When the food was ready, the always unexpected girl refused to sit with them around the blanket. No amount of urging would move her. She retired with her own plate to a place beside the fire.

Though she was the guest, she assumed the duty of hostess, watching their plates and keeping them filled. This was the first amenity she had shown them. They were perplexed to reconcile it with her scornful air.

Only one did she relax. Big Jack, jumping up to put a stick on the fire, did not mark where she set his plate. On his return he stepped in it. The others saw what was coming, and their laughter was ready.

Above the masculine guffaws rang a girlish peal like shaken bells. They looked at her, surprised and delighted. More than anything, the laughter humanized her. She hastily drew the mask over her face again, but they did not soon forget the sound of her laughter.

Big Jack kept control of the bottle, and doled it out with strict impartiality. Under the spur of the fiery spirit, their ardor and their joviality mounted together.

Sam was not offered the bottle. Sam was likewise tactfully excluded from the contest for the girl's favor. It did not occur to any of the four to be jealous of little Sam. He accepted the situation with equanimity. He had no desire to rival them. His feeling was that if that was the kind she wanted, there was nothing in it for him.

Like all primitive meals, it was over in a few minutes. Sam gathered up the dishes, while the other men filled their pipes and befogged the atmosphere with a fragrant cloud of smoke. Like all adventures, they insisted on good tobacco.

The rapidly diminishing bottle was circulated from hand to hand, the hilarity sensibly increasing with each passage. Their enforced abstinence of late made them more than usually susceptible. Their faces were flushed, and their eyes began to be a little bloodshot. They continually forgot that the girl could not speak English, and their facetious remarks to each other were in reality for her benefit. A rough respect for her still kept them within bounds.

Bela, as a matter of course, set to work on the hearth to help Sam clean up. This displeased Joe.

"Ah, let him do his work!" he cried. "You come here, and I'll sing to you."

His partners howled in derision. "Sing!" cried Husky. "You ain't got no more voice than a bullbat!"

Joe turned on him furiously. "Well, at that, I ain't no fat, red-headed lobster!" he cried.

A violent wrangle resulted, into which Shand was presently drawn, making it a three-cornered affair. Big Jack, commanding them to be silent, made more noise than any. Pandemonium filled the shack. The instinctive knowledge that the first man to strike a blow would have to fight all three kept them apart. No man may keep any dignity in a tongue-lashing bout. Their flushed faces and rolling eyes were hideous in anger.

Through it all the amazing girl quietly went on washing dishes with Sam. He stole a glance of compassion at her. Was it possible she did not realize the danger of her situation? He wondered. She must know. How did she expect to get out of it?

Yet, like a man, he had a strong doubt of her, too. What had she come for? That question was still unanswered. Either she was incredibly naive or incredibly artful. He couldn't make up his mind which.

Big Jack, having the loudest roar, battered the ears of the disputants until they were silenced. "You fools!" he cried. "Are you going to waste the night chewing the rag like a parcel of women?"

They looked at him sullenly. "Well, what are we going to do? That's what I'd like to know," said Shand.

A significant silence filled the cabin. The men scowled and looked on the floor. The same thought was in every mind. An impossible situation confronted them. How could anyone hope to prevail against the other three?

"Look here, you men," said Jack at last. "I've got a scheme. I'm a good sport. Have you got the nerve to match me?"

"What are you getting at?" demanded Husky.

Jack put his hand in his pocket. "This shack ain't big enough to hold the four of us," he said, meaningly. "Three has got to get out. I've got a pair of dice here. Three rounds, see? The low man to drop out on each round. The winner to keep the shack, and the other three camp on the shore. What do you say to it?"

CHAPTER V.

The three stared at Big Jack in a dead silence while the underlying sig-

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Significance of his words sunk in. They began to breathe quickly. Sam, hearing the proposal, flushed with indignation. His heart swelled in his throat with apprehension for the girl. How could he make her understand what was going on? How could he help her? Would she thank him for helping her?

Shand was the first to speak. "It's the only way," he muttered.

"How about the cook?" demanded Husky, thickly.

"Hell, he ain't in this game!" said Jack indifferently. "He sleeps outside with the losers."

"I'm damned if I'll stand for it!" cried Joe, excitedly. "It's only a chance! It doesn't settle anything. The best man's got to win!"

"You fools!" growled Shand. "How will you settle it—with guns? Is it worth a triple killing?"

"With my bare fists!" said Joe, boastfully.

"Are you man enough to take on the three of us, one after the other?" demanded Shand. "You've got to play fair in this. You take an equal chance with the rest of us, or we'll all jump on you."

Jack and Husky supported him in no uncertain terms. Joe subsided.

"It's agreed, then," said Jack. "Shand and Husky nodded."

"Let him come in, then, if he wants his chance," said Jack, indifferently. "The losers will take care of him."

Joe made haste to join them. They squatted in a circle around the blanket. Under the strong excitement of the game, each nature revealed itself. Black Shand became as pale as paper, while Husky's face turned purple.

Young Joe's face was drawn by the strain, and his hand and tongue showed a disposition to tremble. Only Big Jack exhibited the perfect control of the born gambler. His steely blue eyes sparkled with a strange pleasure.

"Let me see them?" demanded Husky, reaching for the dice.

Jack laughed scornfully. "What's the matter with you? Tain't the first time you've played with them. There's only the one pair. We've all got to use them alike."

"Let me see them!" persisted Husky, showing his teeth. "It's my right!"

Jack shrugged, and the bone cubes were solemnly passed from hand to hand.

"You can't shoot on a mat," said Joe, jerking the blanket from the floor he tossed it behind him.

"Get something to shake them in," said Shand. "No palming wanted."

Husky reached behind him and took a cup from Sam.

(To be continued.)

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(To be continued.)

WAR MENUS.

HOW TO SAVE WHEAT, BEEF AND BACON FOR THE MEN AT THE FRONT. ISSUED FROM THE OFFICE OF THE FOOD CONTROLLER FOR CANADA.

MENU FOR SUNDAY.

—Breakfast—

Fresh Fruit Oatmeal Porridge  
Tea or Coffee Marmalade  
Milk Sugar

—Dinner—

Cold Roast Veal Tomato Catsup  
Mashed Potatoes Green Beans  
Bread and Butter

Oatmeal Cookies Jelly

—Supper—

Tomato Salad Bread and Butter  
Fruit in Season Cake  
Tea Milk Sugar

HOW TO SAVE WHEAT, BEEF AND BACON FOR THE MEN AT THE FRONT. ISSUED FROM THE OFFICE OF THE FOOD CONTROLLER FOR CANADA.

MENU FOR MONDAY.

—Breakfast—

Oatmeal Porridge Milk Sugar  
Eggs (soft Cooked) Marmalade  
Toast Butter Tea or Coffee

—Dinner—

Beef Stew Potatoes Carrots  
Bread Bakes  
Tea Milk Sugar

—Supper (or Luncheon)—

Cream of Tomato Soup Graham Biscuits  
Apple Sauce Oatcakes  
Tea Milk Sugar

The recipes for Graham Biscuits and Cream of Tomato Soup, mentioned above, are as follows:

Graham Biscuits—

1 quart of skim milk.

½ pint tomato juice (made by stewing ripe tomatoes and pressing through a sieve).

¼ teaspoon of soda.

2 tablespoons of flour.

2 tablespoons of butter.

Salt and pepper to taste, and little

grated onion.

Make the milk, flour, butter and seasonings into a thin white sauce. To the tomato add one-quarter of a teaspoon of soda, and as soon as it ceases to effervesce combine the milk with the tomato and serve at once.

(Wheat and meat-saving recipes by Domestic Science experts of the Canadian Food Controller's office.)

MENU FOR TUESDAY.

Fresh Fruit Cornmeal Porridge  
Graham Bread Sugar Milk  
Coffee or Tea Butter

Mutton Potatoes Corn  
Apple and Bread-Crumb Pudding (Brown Betty)

Sugar Milk

Creamed Fish Warmmed over Potatoes

Baked Peas Sugar Bread

Tea Milk

The recipes for Graham Bread, Creamed Fish and Brown Betty Pudding, mentioned above, are as follows:

Creamed Fish—

Any left-over boiled or baked fish may be served as cream fish by flaking carefully and adding a good, well seasoned white sauce.

Graham Bread—