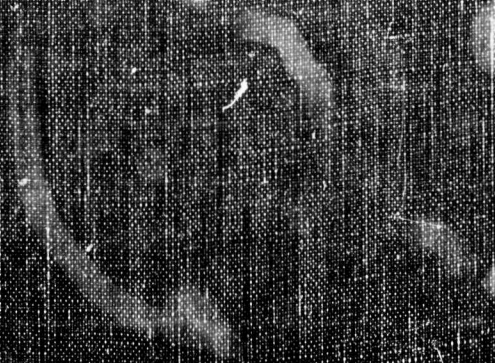
A HEROINE OF THE SEA

Bessie Marchant



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A Heroine of the Sea

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A Heroine of the Sea

BY

BESSIE MARCHANT

Author of "The Secret of the Everglades" "Three Girls on a Ranch" "Held at Ransom" &c.

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A HEROINE OF THE SEA

CHAPTER I

MAUDIE AT HOME

A WILD, broken coast-line, with great cliffs and crags, and a shelving beach, upon which the waves of the North Pacific Ocean broke with a sonorous roll.

But the waters of the Inlet were smoother and quieter than the tossing seas outside, and the Inlet was Maudie's home.

Of course she lived in a house like other people, or at least she slept in one, and took her food there—sometimes. For the rest, she was fishing on the shore or from a boat on the Inlet, or she was baiting otter-traps, or busy with some other of the numerous occupations with which she filled the hours from dawn to dark.

If anyone had been so bold as to suggest that her time would be more profitably spent in looking after the affairs of home, she would probably have laughed them to scorn, declaring that any stupid could run a

house and cook food, but that it took a person with brains to tempt the wily otter to its doom, or secure a good haul of halibut and herring.

So the care of the domestic *ménage* was left to Hooee, who did her best faithfully enough, under the guidance and direction of little Paul. And if Jim and Basil sighed occasionally over the want of charm and comfort in the home, they never even thought of controlling Maudie's actions, or of suggesting a change in her mode of life.

There was no denying the fact that she worked as hard as either of her brothers, or that she was perfectly happy and contented in her toil, never even wishing for luxuries or prettinesses, such as the hearts of most girls yearn after.

One reason for this content most probably lay in the fact that she had never known any other kind of life than her present hard-working existence, and being a healthy girl, with a happy, good-natured temperament, there was in her no disposition, either physical or mental, towards fretting or dissatisfaction.

But although where ignorance is bliss 'tis folly to be wise, the time of awakening to the discomforts of her position was very near for Maudie, if only she had known it.

There was no intuition of coming change to warn her, however, as she fished for herring from a boat high up the Inlet, on a sunny afternoon in early June.

Her sole companion was a small half-clad Indian boy, whose only garment consisted of a ragged strip of red blanket, bound with a rope of walrus-hide about his thin, lithe body.

This boy kept the boat gently moving, whilst Maudie fished in Indian fashion, with a piece of wood studded with nails and fastened to a long handle, in shape not unlike a garden-rake. This she swept with a slow steady fling through the water, the sharp points of the rake being uppermost, and impaling several fish at every sweep. These were landed in the boat by a dexterous twist of the handle, a smart tap against the gunwale being sufficient to jerk the fish from the impaling nails to the bottom of the boat, where a steadily-growing pile testified to Maudie's industry.

The waters seemed fairly alive with fish that afternoon, and she worked on in absorbed content, paying no heed to anything in earth, air, or sky, except the task which she had set herself.

Yet the prospect was fair enough for a lingering fancy to dwell upon with delight. The Inlet, which was fully three miles broad at its opening, had at this part narrowed to less than a mile in width, closely girdled with a wall of tremendous broken crags, and towering forest trees growing right down to the water's edge.

The low timbered house where Maudie lived with her brothers, with its fish-curing sheds and Indian

village in the background, was invisible from this part of the Inlet, as it stood fully a mile nearer to the open sea, on a tiny landlocked harbour.

The boy kept up a peculiar sing-song humming, drawing his breath through his teeth with a sharp whistling sound, which would have driven a nervous person to desperation; but it affected Maudie not at all, as she dragged her rake with vigorous sweeps, impaling the unwary fish and landing them with a monotonous regularity, which reminded one of machinery rather than an impulsive human arm.

Suddenly the boy ceased his humming, and remained so silent, even forgetting to ply his paddle, that Maudie looked up with an air of vexation.

"Why don't you move, Tyke? Have you gone to sleep?"

"De schooner am coming up along," announced the boy in a jubilant tone, his eyes bright with pleasure, for the coming home of the schooner was always a festival at the Inlet, especially when the fish had sold well.

"The schooner, and so soon?" She turned round in unbelieving surprise as she spoke, for her face had been to the land, and, shading her eyes with her hand, gazed intently oceanwards.

A vessel of some kind showed dimly in the offing, but Maudie, whose sight was not so long as the Tyke's, could not determine what manner of ship she was.

"Perhaps it is a boat going to Nootka Sound, or

even to Juneau; we don't expect the schooner in for two days yet," she said, entirely suspending her fishing, in order to scan that distant craft on the horizon.

The Tyke, whose name was a corruption of tyee (chief), and who was a very aristocratic person among his own people, although to outsiders he was merely a sharp-featured, dirty little boy of the Flat-head tribe, drew another long hissing breath as he answered in stolid, unmoved fashion, "De schooner am coming up along," then nodded his head in a series of violent jerks, which threatened to dislocate his neck.

Maudie hesitated a moment longer, screwing her eyes up tightly, in the vain endeavour to see for herself if indeed it was her brother's schooner which was slowly growing into view. The Tyke was to be trusted in an ordinary way, and when there was no question of inclination involved.

But in this case it would be greatly to his advantage to make a mistake, as it would cut his day's work so much shorter if she went home now in order to meet the schooner; and energetic and ready though he was in all matters connected with mischief or amusement, he had a truly Indian and characteristic disinclination for steady work.

Still, she had done very well at fishing that day, even if she did stop work now, and it would be better to lose a little time through a mistake than not to be at home when the schooner came in on the afternoon tide.

So, with a sigh at relinquishing her work before she had caught as many fish as she desired, Maudie gave the word to turn, and, taking a paddle herself, the boat was soon gliding swiftly over the shining, shimmering waters of the Inlet, towards the homestead hidden away on the shore of the harbour.

Maudie herself was a splendid specimen of young vigorous girlhood. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, and brown-skinned like a gipsy, her vivid colouring and natural grace imparted a charm to her coarse attire that many a lady dressed by Worth might have envied.

Her short, thick skirt was fashioned from a red blanket, such as is commonly used by the Indians, whilst a dark-blue jersey and a red cap completed her attire.

Half an hour's brisk paddling brought the boat into the little harbour, which looked quite crowded and populous compared with the wide solitude outside.

The main feature which caught the eye on entering the harbour was the Belloc homestead—a long, low, wooden house that had once been white, but which time and temperature had softened and subdued to a shadowy gray, more in harmony with the surrounding crags. Beside the house there were several rough log-huts in which the work of fish-curing was carried on, and the equally rough log-houses where the Indians lived.

A small white-faced boy was sunning himself in the wide square porch of the big house, and working

by fits and starts at mending a badly-torn fishing-net, which hung suspended on hooks let into the roof of the porch.

"Paul, Paul, the schooner is coming!" shouted Maudie, as she and the Tyke paddled past the house at a great rate, in order to reach the curing-shed farther on, and get their fish unloaded before the schooner came up the Inlet.

The sound of her ringing voice acted like a magic touch on the still life of the harbour shore. When the boat first glided round the bend, the only living thing in sight had been the apathetic figure of little Paul. But now brown-skinned women hurried out from the rough log-huts, children of various sizes started up in unexpected places, seeming almost to rise from the ground itself, and a scene of pretty lively confusion ensued, the women and children scurrying in all directions, in obedience to the clear, high-voiced commands of Maudie, who loved this kind of power, and was wont to boast that she could get more work out of the women in a given time than either Jim or Basil.

Meanwhile the small net-mender had vanished into the house. But Maudie was too busy to pay any heed to him until her fish was safely disposed of.

It took nearly two hours before the work was performed to her satisfaction, then, hurrying up the slope and into the house, she shouted for Paul to come with her along the shore down the Inlet to

meet the schooner, and give the returning brothers a welcome.

But Paul, who was older than his size seemed to warrant, was too much occupied with domestic concerns just then for mere idle diversions like these.

"I can't come, Maudie. I'm so sorry, but I'm showing Hooee how to make a pudding, and it will go all wrong if I turn my back on it until it is ready to eat," he said, in a serious tone; and, bursting into laughter at his appearance of importance, Maudie darted away again.

Getting into the boat, but dispensing for this time with the attendance of the Tyke, she paddled away at a great rate, and was soon lost to view round the bend of the harbour.

Paul had his own ideas about the kind of welcome most likely to be appreciated by his brothers on their return from Victoria, whither they had been to sell their fish; but these were of a practical, housewifely character, and consisted in providing an extra good supper for the travellers.

His subordinate, Hooee, was a mild-faced Indian woman; not a Flat-head, like the other coloured denizens of the Inlet, but a solitary offshoot of the great Cowitchen tribe, who considered herself greatly superior to any of her red neighbours, but was in reality quite as stupid as if her head had been submitted to the flattening process in infancy.

After all, it was an infirmity rather than a fault

which made her so dense of understanding; and she was gazing in open-mouthed admiration of Paul's cleverness, whilst he descanted in glowing eloquence on the art of pudding-making, when the subject of his present endeavours was safely bubbling in the pot.

It was just at this moment that Maudie came rushing in again like a furious North Pacific squall, her hair streaming down her back, damp and clinging from the salt spray, and her face glowing with surprise, and something that looked like hot irritation.

"Paul, Paul, what do you think?" she exclaimed. "There is a woman on board the schooner—a woman and a baby! Wherever do you expect Jim could have picked them up?"

"A woman?" cried Paul, with a breathless gasp of amazement.

"Yes, and a baby. The schooner is beating up the Inlet, and I saw the woman with the child on her arm as she stood on deck talking to Jim, then I came back as fast as I could paddle to tell you. Whatever shall we do?" she cried, with a stamp of her foot on the floor.

But Paul's eloquence had vanished, and he could only shake his head, his face as blank as Hooee's.

CHAPTER II

THE HANDIWORK OF JIM

THE brothers, Jim and Basil Belloc, were about as unlike as it was possible for brothers to be.

Jim was a reserved, almost taciturn young man of twenty-seven years or so, as steady and settled in his ways as many a man of forty; indeed he had need to be, seeing that upon his shoulders had devolved so early the cares of a home and family. He was barely twenty when his father died, leaving Basil, a lad of sixteen, and Maudie and Paul, the children of the second marriage, to his care.

But Jim had been equal to the responsibility, as indeed he was equal to most things, and had done his duty by Basil and the small step-sister and brother as devotedly as if he had been their own father.

Basil was now to a certain extent off his hands, having reached the mature age of twenty-three, and being, moreover, admitted to a partnership in the fishing business, which had grown so much more remunerative during the seven years since the death of their father.

But Maudie was a problem, and honest Jim had

spent many an hour of troubled reflection lately, on the best mode of turning that very independent and unconventional young person into some semblance of a lady, or at least of a domesticated woman.

His eyes were sharp enough to see that his step-sister bade fair to be exceptionally good-looking; in which case, he told himself, in his common-sense, practical way, she was all the more likely to get married, and to marry young.

True, she was barely sixteen yet, and very much of a child in her habits of thought and ignorance of the world. But Jim was accustomed to looking ahead, and the thought of such a contingency even, as Maudie married, in her present unreformed, and indeed almost uncivilized condition, turned him hot all over, and almost made his stubbly hair stand straight up with horror.

Feeling himself quite unable to cope with the situation single-handed, he talked matters over with Basil whilst they were beating their way up the Fuca Strait to Victoria in the schooner, which was laden with fish caught in the Inlet, the skins of sea-otters, clams, and other spoils of the ocean.

Basil, who was a head taller than his elder brother, and as handsome of face as Maudie promised to be, laughed heartily as Jim expounded his dilemma.

"Maudie marry? Why, it will be years yet before she is grown-up enough even to think of such a thing!"

"I'm not so sure of it. And it is always best to be prepared for any emergency; it is no use, for instance, waiting until the storm is on you before reefing your sails, for you would stand a pretty good chance of going to the bottom in double-quick time. Besides, I don't forget that her mother was barely turned eighteen when father married her."

"Young as that, was she? I don't seem to remember her much, except that she was mostly crying;" and Basil wrinkled his handsome features into a heavy frown, in the futile effort at recollection.

"Ah! poor thing, the life at the Inlet was cruel rough on her after what she had been used to. She had always lived in a city, and the quiet and loneliness were more than she knew how to endure, while the smell of the fish made her sick;" and Jim sighed, looking very gloomy indeed, for he had regarded his poor young step-mother with feelings nearly akin to adoration.

But Basil was not impressed. "When I marry, I shall expect my wife to be so fond of me that she will be equally content to live in a wilderness or a city, to sniff roses and carnations, or to put up with the smell of halibut gone wrong," he said, flinging up his handsome head with a lordly air.

"You may expect it, yet fail to get it after all, lad. But what shall we do with Maudie to lick her into shape a little?"

"Send her to school," hazarded Basil, yet without

any conviction in his tone as to the probable success of such a proceeding.

Jim shook his head. "I'm afraid it wouldn't do; if she were three or four years younger now, it would be different. As it is, she'd run away within a week if she didn't like it, and then she'd maybe get it into her head that I wanted to be rid of her, or something of that sort. There is no telling how a high-spirited girl like Maudie will take a thing, and I wouldn't hurt her feelings for any money."

"Get a governess for her, then. Of course, the governess might not like it, and she might run away, but it wouldn't matter about hurting the feelings of a stranger;" and Basil laughed hugely at his own joke, being disposed to make fun of his brother.

"A governess wouldn't be half a bad idea, if only I knew where to get one from," Jim replied musingly.

"Advertise for one, of course, like other people," Basil said, going astern to take his turn at the wheel, for they were by this time gliding past the entrance to Parry Bay, and directly in the course of vessels putting out from Esquimault.

Jim followed him, too much taken up with this new idea to have any thought or attention to spare for other subjects until he had got his plan of campaign shaped to his own satisfaction.

"It would take a goodish time to advertise in the papers, I'm afraid, and I should like to find a suitable person soon enough to take back with us this trip.

How do you think it would do if I had a paper written out and stuck up in a shipping office?"

"There is nothing lost by trying, anyhow, and that seems as good a way as any," Basil replied, in an indifferent tone, being more occupied in endeavouring to give a Nanaimo collier a wide berth than interested in his brother's schemes for the improvement of Maudie's education and manners.

Jim said no more then, and the subject thus dropped —went clean out of Basil's head until the next day, when, their fish all disposed of, the brothers were arranging for various items of business and pleasure, and settling the time for their return voyage.

"I've found her," Jim said then, with a compression of the lips, which in anyone else would have been a smile.

"Found what?" demanded Basil in an uncomprehending tone, thinking the statement had something to do with the schooner.

"A governess for Maudie, of course. What else did you suppose I'd been looking for?"

"But where did you happen on one? there has been no time to stick a paper up anywhere," queried Basil in a puzzled tone, Jim being as a rule deliberate to slowness in all his movements and undertakings.

"I had just got to Gibson's place with a paper written out ready, when I saw a young man with a lady and a baby standing talking to Gibson. I was for drawing back then and waiting till he was dis-

engaged, but he had caught sight of me, and beckoned me forward, saying he wanted my advice."

"A likely story that," interrupted Basil, "when it is well known that he cares for no one's opinion save his own."

"That may be; still, he called me, and I went forward and was introduced to the strangers, a Mr. and Mrs. Neal from England, with their baby. He had come out to a post at Alberni; nothing great, but enough to begin on. Since they reached Victoria three days ago, however, an amazing rumour has come down from Juneau about a heavy find of gold on the Klondyke, and Neal, hearing of it, was wild to go there, only he didn't know what to do with his wife and baby. Gibson asked me if I could throw any wisdom on the situation, and seeing Mrs. Neal looked just about the sort of lady that I should like Maudie to be, why, I handed her the bit of paper I was carrying, and asked her if she'd be willing to undertake the job."

"You did, and without asking if she'd a reference to give you?" demanded Basil, in not unnatural amazement, for this kind of precipitancy was utterly unlike Jim.

"There are some folks that make you feel it would be little short of an insult to ask them for a reference, and Mrs. Neal is like that," Jim answered in a dreamy tone, as if he were thinking of something very far back in the past.

"When is she going to begin?" demanded Basil, lifting his cap and running his fingers through his dark curling hair in great perplexity, for the whole business was incomprehensible to him, because of the haste with which it had been arranged.

"Directly, and we'll start back at midnight. We can manage to be ready by then if we look sharp; and Gibson dropped me a hint that they would be glad to be saved hotel expenses, as Neal would want every penny of their spare money for his journey north."

"That was a hint to you to pay a month's salary in advance; did you take it?" asked Basil, with a laugh.

"No, I didn't; though I'll pay Mrs. Neal when we get to the Inlet if she wants the money. The fact is, I wasn't too well-pleased with what I saw of Neal's eagerness to be quit of his wife and child, so that he might be free to go off on his own account," Jim answered, with a touch of severity.

Basil looked thoughtful. "Preece Morgan always declared that some day they would strike it rich on the Klondyke. I think I'll take a turn round the town and see from what quarter the rumour comes," he said; and, thrusting his hands deeply into his pockets, strolled townwards, apparently only lounging away an idle hour, in reality keenly on the alert for any evidences of the alleged heavy gold find.

Three hours later he came tearing back in a condition of frantic excitement, and Jim, who was stowing cargo, felt his heart sink suddenly as he looked at him.

"What is the matter with you, Basil?" he asked, yet dreaded instinctively the reply his brother should make.

"It's all true, Jim, about the gold. I happened on Preece Morgan himself, and he told me. Nuggets are being picked up of any size from a turkey's egg downwards," he panted.

"Very much downwards I should say. I thought you were old enough, and wise enough too, not to believe more than half of any story you may hear about gold finds," the elder brother said scornfully.

"But this is true, every word of it. Why, I've seen the men who brought the news, and I've seen the gold too; and I say, Jim, you must manage without me somehow, for I want to go too."

"You can't," retorted Jim stolidly, but his face worked, and his lips went dry, as if they were made of parchment.

"I tell you I must. Preece Morgan says that a month hence it will be too late, the San Francisco crowd will have swarmed in and taken the best places," Basil said, with a determined air, straightening himself up and throwing his head back, as if defying his brother.

"Now look here, old fellow, where's the need for

you to go rushing off in this fashion to face no end of hardships, on the off-chance of picking up a few nuggets, when you've got a comfortable living and a good home?" Jim began, in the soothing tone with which one might coax a wayward, restless child.

But Basil burst out: "A home and a living indeed! Why, I may be a millionaire in a few weeks by setting off at once."

"You may, and on the other hand you may not. But there's more than yourself to be considered in this case. What about Maudie and Paul?"

"They have got you, and you have always been worth two of me. But where is the good of wasting words? I am going, I tell you, and nothing you can say will be likely to stop me. What I want is that you let me have a couple of hundred dollars. Preece Morgan says I can do with that, with the help he'll give me. Only you'll have to be quick, for they are to start at dawn for Juneau, and I've my outfit to buy."

"Don't go," pleaded the elder, whose eyes were luminous now, with a soft tender light of entreaty.

"I tell you I am going, and nothing shall stop me. May I have the money?"

"What will you do if I say no?" asked Jim.

"Go without," blazed out Basil, with a dangerous gleam in his eyes, and a movement of his clenched fist as if he would have struck his brother.

"You shall have the money, only I wish we had

never come this trip," Jim answered, with an unsteady voice, and a great bitterness of heart because of Basil's desertion.

"Don't say that," laughed the other, with restored good-nature, now that the monetary question had been settled without difficulty. "For consider, you would not have happened on a governess for Maudie; and Neal would not have found it so easy to dispose of his wife and baby either."

But honest Jim's heart was too sore for banter of this kind to console him, or even to mitigate his sense of coming loss. Basil's nature was light as froth, but the character of the elder brother held depths of feeling and emotion that the other could not even guess at, much less appreciate.

CHAPTER III

TO THE MANNER BORN

"WHAT sort of a woman is she, Maudie?" demanded Paul, when he had in a manner regained his breath after the first shock occasioned by the telling of the news.

"How could I tell with just a glance at her?" she cried impatiently. "One thing only I noticed, which was that she was a white woman and rather young."

"Perhaps she is one of those grand lady-travellers who write books," suggested Paul, with a flushed face and eager eyes.

"Nonsense! lady-travellers of that sort don't have babies," retorted Maudie in a tragic tone. "She is not one of the coming-and-going kind, but has come to stay. We haven't got any relations, have we, aunts or cousins, who would be likely to turn up unexpectedly?" she asked, for Paul was much better acquainted with their family history, such as it was, than she herself.

"Not that I ever heard of. I say, Maudie, do you expect that Jim or Basil has gone and got married?" and Paul breathed quicker, at the bare possibility of such a romantic explanation of the stranger's presence on board the schooner.

Maudie's head went up with a fling, as if the thought of a sister-in-law was especially abhorrent to her, then a sudden recollection stayed her wrath. "No, of course not; there has not been time, for one thing, and for another, there is the baby."

"Ah, I had forgotten the baby!" rejoined Paul, adding sagely, "But she may have been a widow, you know."

Maudie, however, had rushed away once more, without hearing his last remark, and, jumping into her boat, paddled off in great haste.

Paul went out to the porch again then, to watch the arrival of the schooner, only stepping back over the threshold every minute or so to shout an order to Hooee, or to make sure by personal investigation that the pudding continued to wobble in a satisfactory manner in the pot.

He was tremendously excited by Maudie's tidings. So little of change or novelty had ever come his way, that the mere thought of a lady visitor, and one moreover who possessed a baby, had stirred his heart to its deepest depths.

The reason of his denied childhood and unnatural domestic life lay in his rather delicate health and his overwhelming dread of the sea. He hated water as much as Maudie loved it, and no one had ever been able to induce him to set foot in a boat since he had begun to walk and talk.

Nothing had been left undone by his brothers in

their kind-hearted attempts to overcome this distaste, and they had only stopped short of coercion because of their firmly-rooted conviction that force used in such a direction would kill him outright.

So he was left in peace, to live his life according to his own fancy; and, failing work on the water, he turned his attention to such labour on land as seemed to him most necessary and urgent.

Hooee was the particular thorn in his flesh at the present time. She would not work without driving, and it was hard to be compelled to stay in the house, hurrying her slow movements, when he wanted so badly to be free for other occupation.

The schooner was slowly drifting across the harbour-pool—being worked in, they called it at the Inlet,—and Paul, standing on the porch, watched with considerable interest the jerking movements of the man at the wheel as he manœuvred the vessel to her moorings, whilst Jim, standing forward, shouted orders at the top of his voice.

Then it struck the boy as strange that Basil was nowhere visible about the deck. Maudie in her boat was farther out in the middle of the pool, resting on her paddle and watching the berthing of the schooner; and he fancied she had a sober, dejected look very unusual to her, and by no means accounted for by the unexpected presence on board of the stranger and her baby.

At last the working-in process was complete, and

Paul stood on the wharf, his face a queer mixture of pleasant excitement and keen anxiety, as he waited to welcome his brother. Maudie too had paddled in, landed, and joined Paul on the wharf, whilst the Tyke, to whom a rope had been flung, made it fast to the post, then waited for the gangway to be slid over to him.

"Maudie, where is Basil?" Paul asked in a low tone.

"I can't think. Jim called out that he was not on board when I asked, but he did not answer when I asked why," she replied in a troubled manner. Then the gangway being fixed she went on board, and Paul was left to wait still.

Afterwards Jim came ashore, a troubled, moody look brooding over his face, and behind him followed the lady with her baby, Maudie coming last of all.

"I've brought you some company, Paul, my man, and a playfellow too, only he is not very big yet," Jim said, making a valorous effort to smile, which, however, deceived no one.

Paul was painfully shy, and shrank visibly as the lady held out her hand to him.

"That is Mrs. Neal, lad, and she is going to stay with us for a while," Jim went on, performing the ceremony of introduction in a somewhat clumsy fashion.

"I'm glad to see you, ma'am." Paul screwed his

courage up to speaking point, because of the mutinous look which leaped to Maudie's eyes.

"Thank you very much! it is good to be welcomed when one is lonely and the journey has been long," Mrs. Neal answered, with a quivering lip. Then she turned to Maudie and asked a little wistfully, "Are you glad to see me too?"

"I don't know," rejoined that young lady in an uncompromising tone. Then with a thrill of anxiety in her voice she said, "But where is Basil, and why didn't he come home?"

Jim turned away, as if the subject was too sore a one even to speak of, leaving it to Mrs. Neal to explain.

"Tidings of a wonderful gold find on the Klondyke came to Victoria whilst we were there," she said, speaking in a low, sweet tone, which now had such a mournful ring. "The news stirred men's hearts to such a pitch of greed for gain that they were willing to turn their backs upon their nearest and dearest, to desert their homes, throw up all their responsibilities, and fling aside every duty, no matter how sacred, for the chance of getting rich in a hurry. My husband left me to go, and your brother Basil has gone too."

"Where is the Klondyke?" cried Maudie and Paul in a breath, for the name conveyed nothing to them.

"It is somewhere in Alaska. I looked it out on the map whilst I was in Victoria, but it seemed a long, long way off," she said drearily, the smile fading

from her face and a mist of tears coming into her eyes.

"How long will he be gone—Basil, I mean?" Maudie asked with a stamp of impatience, for Basil was the best loved of all her brothers.

But the infant who had been so good hitherto now burst into loud crying, and Mrs. Neal was too much occupied in soothing it to answer Maudie's question just then.

"Perhaps it is hungry, and supper is about ready by now," suggested Paul, on whom the duty of showing hospitality most naturally fell, for Jim was busy with cargo, and the cloud on Maudie's brow was eloquent of her desire to be let alone.

"Poor little man, he is hungry and tired too. He does not often make such a noise," Mrs. Neal said, when her attempts at soothing did but result in louder cries.

"Won't you bring it indoors, please?" Paul ventured nervously, being rather scared than otherwise by the volume of sound produced by the infant, whilst Maudie had taken refuge in flight to grieve in solitude over Basil's desertion.

Ella Neal followed Paul up the slope from the wharf to the house, carrying the sobbing baby in her arms, and wondering as she went why it was that the habitations of settlers in a new country always contrived to be so bare and ugly of aspect.

There had been plenty of time in this case, however,

for the home of the Bellocs to have been embellished and beautified by the touches of a refined civilization. But there had been no clever fingers to set about the task, and although the structure was between twenty and thirty years old, it was as stark, and bare, and ugly as on the day when the last timber had been laid in its place.

The inside was no better; and Mrs. Neal felt her heart sinking lower and lower as she followed Paul into the comfortless, untidy room, where supper was spread on a rough table of doubtful cleanliness, which had no cloth to redeem its barrenness.

The chairs and benches were as grimy of hue as the table, whilst Hooee was the most grimy of all; and Mrs. Neal could hardly refrain from shivering, as she wondered if the woman were cook as well as housemaid.

But she was not the sort of woman to sit down and fold her hands in despair because things were not to her mind, and, supplying the child's immediate wants with some goat's milk brought her by Paul, she set herself in good earnest to the task of fitting herself into these new and apparently rather uncongenial surroundings.

Of course she succeeded, as people always do if they only try hard enough; and by the time she had been an hour domesticated in the house on the Inlet, she was as much at home as if she had been there a week at the least.

She praised Paul's pudding, and partook of it with very real satisfaction when she learned that it was he and not Hooee who had made it.

"Ah! Paul is as handy as a woman at housekeeping and all that sort of thing," Jim said, as he too showed his appreciation of the pudding in such an eminently practical manner that it melted from view like snow in sunshine.

"It isn't anything very great to make puddings and cook food," Maudie said, flinging up her head with a scornful gesture.

"It requires a lot of patience, though, to keep on doing humdrum work of that sort for the good of other people when one would so much rather be pleasing one's self in some other way," Mrs. Neal said quietly, but with such an intuitive grasp of the situation that Paul looked at her in amazement, wondering how she could have discovered so much about him in so short a time.

Maudie looked surprised too. Only, as she had never troubled herself to discover whether Paul liked or loathed his self-appointed daily toil, she could not understand or appreciate the insight and wisdom of the utterance.

Then Jim made the mistake that was to cost Mrs. Neal so many heartaches and discomforts in the near future, and blundered into an explanation of what had so much better have been left undefined, for a short time at least.

"We are going to have changes now, Maudie, and Mrs. Neal has come to governess you a bit, so as to turn you into the sort of woman that your mother was. It has been on my conscience a while back now, that I've been neglecting my duty in letting you run wild as you have done."

"I haven't run wild," flamed out Maudie, with a dangerous light in her eyes, if Jim had been shrewd enough to notice it. "I have worked as hard as you or Basil, and earned as much money too."

"I know, I know," replied Jim soothingly, anxious to calm her rising temper and avert a scene, equally anxious, too, that she should understand the nature and reason of the educational privileges that he had made possible for her. "But a woman has to know such a lot of things that there is no occasion for a man to bother his head about, and you are growing up so fast that it is high time you set about learning."

"I don't want to learn anything, and what is more, I shall not do it. So Mrs. Neal may go back where she came from for all I care, unless indeed she likes to stay and undertake Paul's education. A pretty fine thing it would be for you, now Basil has gone off in this fashion, if I took to spending my days in the house doing sums on a slate, or twirling knitting-needles, whilst the catch went bad for want of curing, or the otter-traps remained unset because there was no one to look to them!" Maudie poured forth her words in such a vehement torrent that Jim's breath

was taken away, and though he opened his mouth once or twice, he remained speechless from sheer inability to answer.

"I think Maudie has right on her side," put in Mrs. Neal, forcing a smile to her lips, though her face was very pale. "You would be lost just at first without her help, now that Basil has gone away. Suppose you let things drift for a week or two until we have all got used to each other. Meanwhile I can find plenty of employment, and be ready to help your sister when she needs me."

CHAPTER IV

AGAINST THE CURRENT

ELLA NEAL'S life had known many changes and disappointments. She had suffered disillusionment too, though she was only twenty-two, and had come to believe that in order to be really happy and content in life, one must not expect too much from anything or any person, otherwise disappointment would of a certainty ensue.

So she had borne with outward courage and composure her husband's selfish eagerness to get her and the child off his hands, in order that he might be free to go in search of wealth in the barren wilds of Alaska. But she had winced under the pain of it none the less because she had hidden the evidences of the smart.

To a woman who could hold her head up under a trouble like that, the mutinous attitude of Maudie Belloc should not have gone deeper than to produce a smile of gentle derision at the childish exhibition of folly. But alas for poor weak human nature! Maudie's revolt proved the very last straw to the endurance of the would-be governess. And when Mrs. Neal lay down to rest that night by the side

of her sleeping infant, she shed some of the bitterest tears that had ever scalded her eyes during the years of her troubled, changeful life.

There had been some perplexity about the room she should occupy, Maudie having declined Jim's suggestion that the new-comer should share her bed. But the difficulty was got over by Paul going to sleep with his brother, and relinquishing his own small chamber to the use of Mrs. Neal and her baby.

The great advantage to the new arrival in this, was that Paul's room was the cleanest and best-kept apartment in the house, though of furniture there was absolutely none, saving a wooden bedstead of home manufacture, and a three-legged table and a stool of the same workmanship.

But it was a shelter, a little spot which, for the time at least, she could call her own, and, buffeted as she was with being tossed and tumbled about in a world where no one, not even her own husband, seemed to want her, Ella drew the sleeping infant closer into her arms, striving to be thankful and content. She fell asleep at last with the tears still wet on her cheeks, and slumbered dreamlessly until morning.

Maudie's voice, raised in shrill complaint because Paul had not on the previous evening finished mending the net which hung in the porch, was the first thing that roused Mrs. Neal in the morning, and, making a hurried toilet, she went out to offer her services in getting the work completed forthwith.

Maudie, who was fuming with vexation and annoyance at the delay, turned in surprise at this unexpected proposal of help.

"But you came to do governessing," she objected, in a rather ungracious tone.

"I know; but I supposed the duties of the post would not consist of teaching only, but might even include learning also. So if you will show me how you want it done, I will go to work at once."

"Do you know anything about net-mending?" asked Maudie, with a distinctly mollified inflection in her tone.

"Only a little, not enough to be of much use, I am afraid; still, I can learn. Oh, like that? Why, that is how the fishermen used to mend their nets at Whitstable when I was a little girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Neal, as Maudie proceeded to demonstrate the method of work.

"If you have seen it done before you will understand it all the better. It should take about an hour if you keep straight at it, and I shall be quite that time gone round the Inlet, looking after the otter-traps. I mostly do that before breakfast at this time of year."

"Very well, it is a race then; only I'm afraid you will win, because you have familiarity on your side," Mrs. Neal said with a laugh, as she commenced her task.

There was a smile on Maudie's face too as she

hurried away to her boat, where the Tyke awaited her coming.

It was still very early, not much past the dawning, and the veil of sleep was only lifting slowly from the waters of the Inlet and the sparsely-cultivated reaches of country, where the forest had been pushed back from the shore.

Mrs. Neal smiled to herself a great deal as she drove the flat needle through the meshes of the net. She was a cheerful person by nature, and usually relegated her sorrowful thoughts to night and solitude. The morning, too, was fair and sweet, inclining one to feel light-hearted and happy.

Little Ronald cried presently, and, dropping her needle, she went indoors, wrapped him in a shawl, and, bringing him out, let him crawl about the floor of the porch whilst she finished the net.

Paul appeared once, gave her a shy, embarrassed greeting, and retreated again. From the sounds which ensued afterwards, she judged that he must be engaged in very active endeavours towards the driving of Hooee through the morning routine of work.

Presently a big canoe came across the harbour-pool from the Inlet, and Mrs. Neal recognized in its occupants two men who had formed the crew of the schooner, and Jim, the three having been spearing salmon in the little river which drained into the Inlet.

She put the finishing touches to the net as the canoe bumped against the landing-steps, and, picking up Ron, carried him off to bathe and dress before breakfast.

The morning meal was more scrambled and uncomfortable even than supper had been on the previous night, which was saying a great deal. The coffee was excellent, whilst the salmon, fresh from the water and cooked to a turn, an epicure might have envied. But the neglected, uncared-for room, the absence of everything tending to prettiness or refinement, and the utter strangeness of her surroundings, produced in Mrs. Neal the sense of acute depression from which she had suffered so severely on the previous night.

She was stronger to wrestle with it now, however, and did such violent battle with her unseen foe that the smile did not fade from her face, nor did her power of pleasant retort once fail her, even when her heart was aching at its worst.

Maudie was gone not one hour but two, and returned flushed and triumphant, having had quite a record bag that morning. She wore wading-boots like Jim, and her scarlet-blanket skirt was dripping with sea-water, the little rivulets leaving a track of moisture on the dusty floor where she had walked.

Mrs. Neal watched her quietly. The girl was so absolutely absorbed in her daily work that she had no desire for anything different; and it seemed a hopeless task even to arouse in her the desire for a

more womanly existence. At present the one ambition of her life was to fish, and she talked and thought of nothing else than her piscatorial achievements, with the probable monetary gain her work would bring.

Jim also was abstracted and indifferent on every other subject, and Mrs Neal came to the conclusion that she would either have to become violently interested in everything that had a fin and a tail, or else be content to retire to the background for good and all.

Maudie vanished again, after she had satisfied the demands of her healthy young appetite. She carried with her the net which Mrs. Neal had mended, yet never troubled herself to say "thank you" for the labour so cheerfully bestowed upon it. With the unreasonableness of illogical girlhood, she blamed Mrs. Neal for Basil's desertion of home and family, and treated her in consequence as an objectionable person, whom she was compelled by stress of circumstances to tolerate.

Jim was more thoughtful and kind in his behaviour, coming out of his fishy abstraction when breakfast was over, to display quite an active interest in the well-being and happiness of the stranger under his roof.

"I think you were wise in what you said about Maudie helping me for the present," he began, "for, now it has come to the point, I really don't know what I should do without her just now with Basil

away, if she took to sitting indoors all day over her bits of books and fancy-work."

"I could not imagine Maudie doing fancy-work; it would be quite surprising enough to see her absorbed in books," Mrs. Neal replied demurely, trying not to laugh at the mental picture Jim's words called up. "But there are more ways of educating a person than one, Mr. Belloc, and I may be able to teach your sister a few things in spite of herself, if I am only allowed to go my own way to work about it."

"Do as you think best, and I promise you I'll not interfere," he said heartily. "If you could only make her like yourself now, outside and inside too, I'd be amply satisfied."

Mrs. Neal flushed, but Jim's manner was so innocent of any intention to merely pay her a compliment that she could not be so foolish as to take exception to his simple, earnest words.

"I will do what I can for her," she replied. "Meanwhile, with your permission I will undertake the house-work, for I must do something towards earning my board and lodging; and, besides, I should simply hate to be idle."

"Paul would be glad to be a bit freer of the house, I know, for he is always talking about wanting more time to work in the garden, but you will be able to settle that between you. Only don't go slaving yourself to death with hard driving. You've got the little lad to look after, you know, and babies take a lot of

care most times," Jim returned, with an air of experience which would have done no discredit to the father of a family, but which was accounted for by his trials in rearing his step-sister and brother.

"You are very kind," Mrs. Neal murmured, smiling now in good earnest, though her eyes were blurred with tears, for in going up and down in the world she had met with few people like Jim Belloc. In most cases she had been treated as a mere machine, to be driven to the utmost of her working capability, and so this exhortation to take care of herself was disconcerting, from its very novelty.

"Paul, I am going to make a bargain with you," she cried, when Jim had gone off to his daily avocations, and she was left to order her day according to her own will and pleasure.

"What sort of a bargain?" he asked, looking up with a weary air from a crumpled, greasy account-book wherein he was entering the household stores brought by his brother from Victoria. His manner of book-keeping was entirely original, and as his mode of writing consisted in the copying of printed letters, the process was a long and tiring one.

"This sort. You hand over to me the cooking, and I will teach you to write and keep books, as they do in shops and warehouses. You can give the orders, you know, and I will do the work like—let me see—like a second Hooee;" and she laughed at her own comparison.

"Hooee is so awfully dull I positively can't help shouting at her and calling her stupid," he answered apologetically, grimacing a little as he wagged his head in the direction of the back porch, whither the Indian woman had retired after a hearty feed on the remains of the breakfast, and was now chewing the cud of calm reflection in absolute idleness, sitting in the sunshine.

"I was not complaining of your methods. You may call me stupid too if I as richly deserve the epithet, and I will be meek under the infliction; but I want to know, do you agree to my bargain?" Her face grew a little anxious as she looked at him, for should Paul be as intractable as Maudie her position in the house on the Inlet would prove intolerable indeed, and her lack of means made it impossible for her to seek another home.

"Do I!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands with a gesture of derision. "If you only knew how I have hated being mewed up in the house all day, scurrying Hooee round, you'd understand what it would feel like to be quit of it. I want to learn things too, only I'm stupid at books. Jim and Basil taught me to read between them; but it was shocking hard work, they said, more wearing than night-fishing, and as soon as they got me into two-syllable words they were glad to give it up."

Mrs. Neal laughed until she cried over this pathetic story of education under difficulties, whilst Baby Ron,

who was trying to walk by the aid of a long wooden bench, plumped down on the floor and laughed too, although he did not know where the joke came in.

Then she drew the account-book away from Paul, and, appropriating the stumpy pencil, entered the goods in a firm, clerkly hand according to his directions.

"Now that is done, and you must tell me what is the next thing," she said brightly, looking round the dismal disorderly room with a wonder in her heart as to whether she would ever succeed in making it look clean and cheerful.

"Oh! there's so many things, I mostly strike in where the muddle seems biggest," he answered rather blankly, for his household labours were always puzzling to define, even when he kept on toiling all the time.

"I see. Well, I am going to begin with Hooee; meditation may be all very well at certain times, but it is quite out of place at eight o'clock on a summer morning in a house like this," Mrs. Neal said, and proceeded to prod that very torpid person into such vigorous exercise as simply amazed the watching Paul.

"How did you do it?" he asked, for Hooee was not in the habit of moving with so much alacrity, saving when mosquitoes were troublesome.

"When you have to pull against the current in getting your canoe up-stream, it is sometimes wiser

to tack backwards and forwards instead of keeping straight on," she replied, "and that is what I am forced to do with Hooee. If I had ordered her to wash those dishes at once, she would not have been disposed to lift a finger; but because I promised her a red ribbon if she did the work quickly and well, she is going ahead as vigorously as a white woman."

CHAPTER V

A RUMOUR OF EVIL

ONE morning some three weeks later Maudie paddled down to the mouth of the Inlet to look after some otter-traps, which she had fixed artfully enough among the smooth boulders that lined the shore under the towering crags.

The Tyke was with her, as a matter of course. He was always useful in helping to paddle, in taking care of the boat when it was necessary for her to land, and, by reason of his longer sight, in detecting at once any unusual appearance on the surface of the sea which might betoken the presence of a shoal of fish.

Somehow the zest of daily work had waned a little of late. She missed Basil more even than at first she had expected. He was so much merrier than Jim, and had always been ready, when his day's work was done, to accompany her on expeditions round the Inlet or up the river, just for the pleasure of being afloat. At such times he would make the echoes ring with laughter and song, in which Maudie would join with light-hearted glee.

Oh, they had been happy days indeed! and it had mattered not at all to her that home had grown more

dreary and neglected with every month that passed. She had not even troubled at the fading, fragile appearance of Paul, never guessing it was largely owing to his care-worn burdened life and lack of healthy outdoor exercise. He had been a puny, sickly baby, and it seemed only natural to her that he should continue in the same condition.

Now the old order had passed away, and home under the active generalship of Mrs. Neal had grown so bright and attractive that Maudie scarcely seemed to recognize it as the same place when she went indoors. Paul, too, looked so much better and happier, that she might have rejoiced at the changed aspect of things, if it had not been that she cherished such a strong dislike to the new inmate, and persisted, in defiance of all reason and common sense, in regarding her as the cause of Basil's going away.

This unfortunate prejudice so embittered her mind that even work lost its joy, and she spent her days in a state of brooding discontent, her aspect sullen and lowering, her temper short and uncertain.

On this particular morning she was looking even more unamiable than usual, and the Tyke, who watched her narrowly, decided that it was only prudent to take care, lest by some blunder he should chance to encounter the full force of the storm which appeared so near to bursting.

He forgot his caution, however, a little later on, when, sending a falcon gaze out over the rolling

waves of the open sea, he caught a glimpse of a sight he knew full well.

"Houlakan, houlakan, houlakan!" he shouted, executing a caper which made the boat sway and dip in an ominous fashion.

"Where, where?" cried Maudie, to the full as eager as he was, her ill-temper vanishing as if by magic under the influence of excitement.

"Straight over de biggest o' dem three flat stones. Not dem ones, missy, but norrards, norrards!" and the boy swayed his thin brown body to and fro in the vigorous effort to make Maudie understand, even if through her shortness of sight he failed to make her see the approaching shoal.

"We must paddle back as fast as we can go, to warn the boss and order out the boats," she said, her breath coming in quick pants and the colour deepening in her cheeks from excitement.

Away they went then, making the light boat skim through the water like a bird. As they neared the harbour the Tyke sent his voice ahead of him in a weird, piercing yell of "Houlakan, houlakan, houlakan!" until the solitary shore rang with the noise of his crying.

The place was quickly astir then, and in a very short time the schooner was gliding down the Inlet under full sail, making for the open sea. Jim and Maudie were both on board, with all the available coloured population who were of any use at all at that kind of

work; for a catch of houlakan was always a source of gain, the fish, which was about the size of a herring, yielding a valuable supply of oil when pressed. As a rule, however, Jim preferred to dry it, as it sold so readily in that condition, being bought by the Indians of the mainland for use as torches, a dried fish stuck in a cleft stick giving as much light as three ordinary candles.

A big canoe and two small ones encumbered the schooner's deck, whilst the two boats she carried were swung out ready for lowering when the scene of operations was reached.

The group on deck were too excited for talking, and stood for the most part straining their eyes for the first sight of the shoal.

Houlakan had been very rare on that coast during the past two seasons, so that the coming of the shoal was even more eagerly welcomed than usual. Probably the Tyke would not have understood so well the indications of the near neighbourhood of the fish, but for the fact of his having spent the whole of the previous season fishing with another portion of his tribe among the inlets and bays to the north of Nootka Sound. As it was, he had given the alarm so promptly, that the schooner had arrived upon the fishing-ground and unshipped her boats and canoes before any other appearance of shipping on the horizon betokened a rival in the field.

The ocean was calmer than usual that day; the

long Pacific swell came in with such a gentle motion that the schooner rolled hardly at all, whilst the smaller craft hugging the shore and netting houlakan were scarcely encumbered by the movement, although in an ordinary way it was impossible to work from the little boats when away from the shelter of the Inlet.

The catch was assuming quite magnificent proportions, and Maudie, who had remained on the schooner to receive and store the fish as it came, was gloating with delight over the profitable nature of the day's work, when her attention was arrested by the sight of a small steam-tug bearing up from the south, and evidently making for the Inlet.

Taking the speaking-trumpet she shouted the tidings to Jim, who was some distance away, fishing from one of the schooner's boats, with an Indian to help him.

From his position he had failed to catch sight of the tug; the shoal of houlakan were drifting northward, and the boats in consequence had drifted too. But on hearing Maudie's news he turned his boat's head at once towards the schooner, swinging himself up on to the deck by the rope left trailing over the side, and coming to the side of his sister, who was scanning the tug with great curiosity and interest through Jim's glass.

"Give it me, will you, Maudie?" he said, stretching out his hand for the glass, and then applying himself

to it with as much curiosity and interest as she had displayed.

But there was an anxious, almost frightened expression in his face a moment later, which made Maudie cry out in great agitation, "Why, Jim, whatever is the matter with you? from your face anyone would think you had seen a ghost."

"I think that I would about as soon see a ghost as that," he replied, swinging his hand out towards the trimly-built little vessel, which was steering a straight course for the mouth of the Inlet. "It is a police-boat, Maudie; I've seen craft like it scores of times at Victoria and in the Fuca Strait, but I never thought to see a boat of that kind at the Inlet."

Maudie's face paled visibly. "What has it come for?" she gasped, trying to think of all possible and impossible reasons which might have led to such an undesirable result.

"How should I know?" he retorted with unintentional roughness. "But, look here, I want you to stay and look after the men and the catch whilst I make for home, for I can't rest until I know what that boat has come for."

"Let me go, Jim; oh, please let me go instead! I will take Tyke and the small boat, and we'll overhaul the other craft in half an hour. There may not be anything wrong, you know; they may only have put in at the Inlet for fuel, or water, or—" but

her voice broke and faltered, whilst her face was ashy pale. The thought was in both their hearts that something was wrong with Basil, only as yet neither had courage to put the fear into words.

"We will both go, the catch can take care of itself for once," Jim answered hoarsely. Then, seeing that the boat in which he had returned to the schooner was by this time emptied of its fish, he slid down the rope into it, and Maudie followed him in the same fashion. The Indian was left behind on the schooner with the Tyke for his companion.

Brother and sister rowed at the top of their speed, but never once spoke. Jim's face was stern and set, but Maudie's quivered with pain as she strained every nerve in order to make the boat fly faster through the water, so that they might the sooner overhaul the tug.

But steam was their rival, and, hard as they worked, they could only diminish a little the distance between themselves and the snorting, aggravating little boat which puffed ahead.

They were losers in that race despite their efforts, the tug steaming into the harbour-pool before they arrived within hail.

By this time a curious reluctance to know its errand had come upon Maudie, and she would have rowed away now as strenuously as before she had striven to overhaul the other boat, but that escape was out of question. She had to sit still and wait whilst

Jim shouted to the man standing by the rail, asking the reason of such an unexpected visit.

"Is your brother Basil at home?" came back the answer in the form of a question, which set Maudie's mind at rest with a sudden relief; for surely if the individual on the tug did not know whether Basil was at home or not, he had not come to bring tidings of ill concerning him.

There was no such feeling of reassurance in the mind of Jim, however, as he scanned the man on the deck of the tug, and recognized in him a person he had known slightly in Victoria, Tom Everson by name, who held some post at the docks. Why he should be on a police-boat Jim did not understand. He did not even stay to give a thought to the subject; it was enough that the man was there, and that he had enquired for Basil.

"No, he didn't come back with me on the last trip," Jim answered slowly, and with an unaccountable sinking at heart, whilst he waited for the other to explain himself more fully.

This, however, Tom Everson seemed disinclined to do. Looking round, he held a short consultation with someone not visible to the two who waited in the boat, then he shouted an order to the man at the wheel, after which the tug moved slowly in towards the landing-stage, and was moored in the place usually occupied by the schooner.

Jim drove his own boat landwards with a heavy

shadow on his face—from the bottom of his heart he hated mysteries. If the man on the tug had business with Basil, why could he not declare it? And his reticence seemed but another proof that evil lay behind.

Maudie too was disturbed and uneasy; the sudden relief she had felt at Mr. Everson's first query passed again into a shrinking dread of she knew not what.

Tom Everson landed at the same time as she and Jim set foot on shore, and his face as he came to greet them was grave enough to warrant the most serious apprehensions.

"Is this your sister, Belloc?" he enquired, lifting his cap to Maudie, who blushed hotly, and was instantly ashamed of her own stupidity.

Jim answered curtly that it was, then waited in an agony of impatience to hear what tidings of evil the other had brought.

"You will wonder at seeing me on a police-boat," Tom Everson said, forcing a smile; "but the superintendent is an old friend of mine, and he consented to put in here on his way round to Alberni. I guess, however, he would not have troubled to steam up the Inlet if we had known who was chasing us."

"What did you come for?" burst out Maudie, unable to bear any longer the strain of anxiety and dread.

"I wanted to warn you both," he said, dropping his voice, and casting a quick look behind him towards

the tug moored by the landing-stage. "I wanted to see Basil too if I could, in order to get him to come forward and establish his alibi at once."

"Why?" burst from the other two in a breathless hurry.

Tom Everson shifted his position again, and once more gave a swift glance backward at the police-boat. "I wish your brother had been at home. If he had, as I expected, come back with you last trip, and remained here ever since, things would have been easy enough, but now—"

"Oh, do stop hinting, and speak right out!" implored Maudie, with a catch in her voice. "Why is it that you wish Basil had been at home, and what is wrong?"

"It is all a mistake, I dare say, but it may be an awkward one for Basil if it can't be cleared up easily. There has been a desperately bad case of robbery with violence from a lonely hut down on the dock-side, and the victim, an elderly man, has died since of his hurt. But he died silent so far as accusation of anyone goes."

"Well?" queried Maudie, with a snort of defiance in her tone, her quick-wittedness giving her the clue to the direction in which the stranger's thoughts were moving.

"Basil and I were always good friends, and I should have been glad to have helped him if I could," Tom Everson said, with gloom deepening on his face. "And

when Captain Clark dropped a word in my place, that he had seen someone uncommonly like the younger Belloc leaving the hut late on the night when the robbery must have taken place, why, I laughed him to scorn."

"What was the name of the man who died?" asked Jim between his clenched teeth.

"Preece Morgan, the prospector," replied the other.

CHAPTER VI

A BROODING FEAR

NEVER surely did governess have an apter pupil than Mrs. Neal found in poor neglected Paul Belloc, and as the curriculum included a wide variety of subjects extending from mathematics to marmalade-making, and from furniture-polishing to the most up-to-date methods of growing cucumbers, there was small likelihood of the quest of knowledge palling upon either instructor or instructed.

There was a breezy vigour in the personality of Ella Neal which infected everyone with whom she came in contact, or upon whom her influence was brought to bear. Hooee in particular was so impressed, that she had developed into quite an energetic individual, moving with such unwonted celerity that everyone was amazed at the change; everyone, that is, except Maudie, who laughed scornfully as she declared that the handmaiden had only been bribed into activity with old ribbons, and inducements of that kind, but that in reality she was just as slow as ever.

Whether that was true or not, and Maudie's judgment was usually to be relied upon, the house on the

Inlet was beginning to wear such a changed appearance, that Jim was tempted to wonder how he could have borne with the old order of things so long.

The home of the Bellocs was built after the fashion common among country houses in that part of Vancouver. The main apartment, which was sitting and dining room combined, had a large square fireplace in the centre of the room, with the chimney built directly above it, an arrangement that allowed everyone to get close to the fire in the bitter cold of the long winter evenings. This chimney was directly in the centre of the house, the room which it warmed being a wide chamber of an oblong shape with rooms opening off from either side, so that Maudie's bedroom, with that occupied by Mrs. Neal, and a tiny closet into which Hooee crept at night when her work was done, took one end of the house, whilst the other end was occupied by a rough kind of kitchen containing a cooking-stove, and the chamber where slept Jim and Paul.

Some attempt at furnishing had evidently been made in the years that were past, probably as far back as the rule of the first Mrs. Belloc; but the chairs and tables and dingy old presses were so grimed and black from age and ill use, that Mrs. Neal was forced into drastic methods of cleansing before the process was complete, according to her estimation of completeness. To scrub these articles with soap and water was plainly out of the question; but an inspira-

tion came to her one day when she was out with little Ron, and saw the endless avenues of mighty pine-trees which clothed the hills behind the house, and, acting upon it with the help of Paul, she tapped some of the most likely trees, getting in that way sufficient turpentine to clean the furniture of twenty houses.

With so much business on hand, Mrs. Neal had little time for sorrowful reverie concerning the hardness of her lot in being parted from her husband, and although she thought of him and prayed for him as a good wife should, his absence did not make the blank in her life that she had expected it would. She had her baby, and he filled her heart so full that she missed nothing in the way of love; and shielding she had never had from her husband when he was by her side, hence in that respect she felt no lack either.

On the day of the houlakan catch she was busy with a batch of bread, which was in process of baking in the oven and on the flat top of the cooking-stove, whilst Paul, sitting on the door-step, wrestled with the difficulties of the multiplication-table, and Hooee carried Ron about in the sunshine, tied in a bundle on her back after the fashion of native babies.

So absorbed were Mrs. Neal and her pupil in their respective tasks, that neither of them knew anything about the approach of the police-boat until it was actually in the harbour-pool.

Hooee came rushing in at the same moment with tidings of the arrival, bringing the additional information that the boss and Missy Maudie were also close at hand, and had already hailed the strange craft.

Mrs. Neal took Ron in her arms then, and went out to see if by any chance the newly-arrived boat had brought up letters from Victoria; for mails only reached the Inlet when a passing boat put in there, or when the schooner made its periodical trip to the town.

She made her enquiry of the officer in charge, before she noticed that Jim and Maudie were in close conversation with a stranger at the corner of the curing-shed, where the smaller boats were moored.

"Neal! Neal!—I don't fancy I have any letters or papers for anyone of that name, but I will see," the superintendent answered in a courteous tone. He was always gentle and affable in his manner to women, unless they were criminals, when it was said of him that no one was sterner or more uncompromising.

He came back from the cabin a minute later, shaking his head in a regretful fashion. "There is not so much as a postcard for you, my dear madam. But then we did not intend putting in at the Inlet when I called at the post-office for the Alberni mails, so that your letters may well be lying at Victoria still. It is too bad if you were looking for news, but that is the

penalty one has to pay when living in an out-of-the-world place like this."

"I wanted to hear from my husband," she said simply, the flush of expectation in her cheeks paling to disappointment. "He was on the point of starting for Juneau, en route for the Klondyke, when I left Victoria three weeks ago."

"Ah! tempted by the gold rush, I suspect! I remember there was a party going to Alaska, but it broke up through some disagreement, and the scheme fell through. Some of the men may have gone, certainly, after all, but in that case they must have made the journey from Seattle, for no vessel has left Victoria for Juneau since then."

"Are you sure? In that case my husband would have certainly written to me. Oh, how trying it is to live in such an isolated place as this, where the mails come in only once in a month!" Mrs. Neal exclaimed, in considerable doubt and agitation.

The superintendent smiled with an air of lofty commiseration for the feminine ignorance which could limit, even in thought, the amount of knowledge possessed by a police official.

"My dear madam, we are supposed to know everything, and we certainly endeavour to live up to what is expected of us. In this case, too, we have had the details fixed in our minds by a circumstance too unpleasant to be easily forgotten."

"In what way?" she asked, anxious to learn what

she could concerning the delay of the expedition, even though it might give her no clue to her husband's present whereabouts.

"The man who organized the party, and tried to arrange for a vessel to transport them to Juneau, was robbed of all he possessed, and so knocked about in the process that he has since died," rejoined the superintendent, who was a garrulous individual, extremely fond of hearing himself talk.

"What was the man's name?" queried Mrs. Neal sharply, gripping Ron so tightly that the child gave a loud cry of protest.

"The man who was robbed? Preece Morgan. The old fellow was known to be very well off; but to knock him about in such a fashion was like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs, for he knew more about Alaska than most men, and was one of the cleverest prospectors I have ever known."

It was well for Mrs. Neal that the superintendent kept on talking, as it gave her a moment in which to recover the shock of hearing Preece Morgan's name; for well she remembered him as the man who had induced her husband to throw up his certain position at Alberni and embark on the Klondyke enterprise.

"Who did it?" she faltered, feeling compelled to say something, through fear lest the man should notice the ghastly look on her face and make a guess at its cause.

"Ah, that is just what we are wanting to know,"

the superintendent rejoined in a complacent tone. "A man in Preece Morgan's position would as likely as not have as many enemies as friends. But we shall probably not have much difficulty in finding the thieves, for plainly the old man left his mark upon them before they got clear away with the booty."

Mrs. Neal repressed a shiver by a great effort. "You say the man, Preece Morgan, lived for some time afterwards. Did he accuse anyone?" she forced herself to ask, though her lips were dry and parched, and her heart was beating so fast that she could scarcely articulate her words.

"No, for the very simple reason that he could not, for between rage and fear he was in such a condition as to induce a paralytic stroke, which rendered him speechless."

"He did not die of his wounds, then?" she said quickly, catching at his words as if they afforded some glimmer of hope to lighten the dark cloud of her inward misery.

"Yes, he did, for if he had not been so knocked about and shaken he would not have had the stroke; or if he had, he might have lived on for years in spite of it; people often do. But what a time I am keeping you talking! I must see if my friend Everson is ready to start; it has already hindered me a full two hours coming up the Inlet." As he spoke the superintendent lifted his cap courteously to the lady,

and turned away to where Tom Everson still lingered in close conversation with Maudie and Jim.

Mrs. Neal turned also, and beat a speedy retreat into the house.

"Hooee, take care of the little one for an hour or two, I am not well," she faltered, letting Ron tumble anyhow into the arms of the coloured woman. Then she went to her room, shutting the door and fastening it against all comers.

Dropping on her knees by the bed, she cowered in spirit before the terrible fear which had taken possession of her.

Whose hand was it that had been raised against Preece Morgan? The question was being repeated with awful iteration in her brain, whilst dark suspicions and terrible doubts were racking her heart, as she remembered passionate words dropped by her husband at their parting, concerning what he would do if Preece Morgan attempted to play him false.

CHAPTER VII

SUFFERING BY COMPARISON

TOM EVERSON had come to the sudden determination to stay where he was, and return to Victoria on the schooner with Jim Belloc, instead of going on to Alberni in the police-boat as he had at first intended.

The reason for this change of plan was ostensibly that he could get back to the city quicker than if he went all round the coast in the police-boat; but in reality it was his anxiety about Basil Belloc, which made him feel he would rather have nothing more to do with his friend the superintendent than he could help just then, lest haply in an unguarded moment there might drop from him some hint of knowledge that for the time had better be suppressed.

The superintendent was plainly disappointed at losing his companion, but he could not waste much time in urging Tom to reconsider his determination, as the boat had been delayed so long already.

When the puffing, energetic little tug had worked its way out of the harbour again, and was lost to sight going down the Inlet, the three who had been watching it turned to enter the house.

Jim paused suddenly before they had gone more than half a dozen steps. "Maudie, not a word of this to Paul. I won't have the child's life darkened by troubles that may never come, and I'm hoping to have it all put right when I get to Victoria."

"As if I should be likely even to dream of such a thing!" she retorted scornfully. "There is much more likelihood of your going and chattering about it to Mrs. Neal."

"Who is Mrs. Neal?" enquired Tom Everson curiously. He had often heard from his friend Basil of the primitive simplicity of life on the Inlet, but he had never heard of any other feminine occupant except Maudie and the coloured woman Hooee.

"Mrs. Neal is—a lady," rejoined Jim, in a tone which forbade further questioning, and though Maudie laughed in a hard, unpleasant fashion, nothing more was said upon the subject.

Paul met them in the porch, saying that Mrs. Neal had gone to lie down until supper because her head ached; but as none of the three to whom he spoke had noticed her talking with the superintendent, no one dreamed of connecting her indisposition with the coming of the police-boat.

"Maudie, will you go back to the schooner and have the men home as soon as possible?" Jim said after a minute or two of silent meditation on the necessity of altering the routine of work.

"But the houlakan, think what a lot we shall lose!

Couldn't they keep on until dark? we may not have another shoal this season," she said, with a blank look of wonder as to whether Jim had taken a sudden leave of his senses.

"I can't help that. The men must come home now in order to get a few hours' rest. Then at midnight we'll start netting the river, and have a load of salmon ready to sail with the noon tide for Victoria. That is why I want you to go back to the schooner, because I must be getting the cured fish out of store and packed ready for market."

"Ah! if you are going to have a salmon-take that makes all the difference, and I'll be off at once," she said, with a quick comprehension and ready obedience which filled the onlooker with profound admiration; but then he did not understand that it was the first principle in Maudie's code of honour to render unquestioning allegiance to the boss on all points connected with the daily toil.

"May I come too?" Tom Everson asked, foreseeing that he might easily be a hindrance to Jim, who wanted to be busy in store and curing-shed.

"Oh, yes! if you can row, that is, but not unless; because I must make haste, and if you can't help you will hinder, you know," she rejoined, with a brilliant smile, which made him decide that she was an uncommonly good-looking girl, despite the wild unconventionality of her attire and the uncommon character of her daily avocations.

"I won the Ottawa championship before I came west, so perhaps I sha'n't be altogether a hindrance," he answered, for although, as a rule, no man was more modest than he, he felt that the occasion called for a little boasting, as this hoydenish young fisherwoman was disposed to treat him in a disdainful fashion.

"Oh!" exclaimed Maudie with a heightened colour, and there was a sudden accession of respect in her manner when she next spoke to him, which amused Tom Everson not a little.

They pulled down the Inlet at a fine rate, but the man had to admit that he was no match for his companion, despite the boasted honour of the championship, as he was not in training, whilst Maudie was as fit as could be.

"Well, I'll allow it is the very first time I have ever been beaten by a girl," said Tom Everson when they had clambered on board the schooner, and Maudie had issued her orders to the fishers.

"Perhaps it won't be the last time, though," she rejoined, with a self-satisfied laugh, forgetting for the moment her anxiety about Basil in the delight of having beaten this rather supercilious stranger.

"Don't you do anything but fish?" he asked later on, when the men and the catch had been got on board, and the schooner was moving before a good head-wind straight for the Inlet.

"Not much. I don't like any other sort of work," she admitted candidly.

"But who looks after the house—cooks, washes, sews, and all that sort of thing?" he asked curiously, for the glimpse he had had of the Belloc homestead had given him the impression that it was an unusually well-cared-for house for a primitive country like that.

"Paul and Hooee used to do it between them. I don't say they did it very well, still we always had enough to eat, such as it was. But since Mrs. Neal came, things have been different, I can tell you. We always have table-cloths on when we breakfast, dine, or sup, and the house is so clean that I am afraid to put my head inside almost, much more my feet. Not that I'm grumbling about it, though, for she makes such lovely bread and cakes that I'd forgive her a good deal more than her weakness for scrubbing."

Tom Everson laughed. He had seen a considerable amount of the world during his four-and-twenty years of life, but he had never met a girl so frankly natural and candid as Maudie.

"Who is Mrs. Neal?" he asked again. "Of course, I remember that your brother said she was a lady, which was a little superfluous, as that is what every woman is, or ought to be. Still, the term does not convey much information."

"Jim engaged her as governess for me; only when she came I wouldn't be taught, so she turned her attention to Paul instead, looking after the housekeeping between whiles."

"Why wouldn't you be taught?" demanded Mr.

Everson with a slight frown, as he began half-unconsciously to take sides in his own mind with the governess against this splendid young fisher-girl, in her ragged jersey and soiled red-blanket skirt.

"Because I didn't want to, of course," she replied, throwing up her head with an offended air. "Fancy me sitting mewed up in the house all day reading out of a book or doing sums on a slate, while there are fish to be caught by the ton, if one has only industry and skill enough to do it."

"I don't hold with too much book and slate work for women myself," said the man, with an assumption of masculine superiority which was maddening to Maudie. "But there are so many other things that a girl ought to know, such as baking, mending, and that style of thing."

"Still, if a girl doesn't want to learn how to be a domestic slave, I don't see why she should be compelled to do it," rejoined Maudie with a pout; and then she turned away to rate the Tyke for some dereliction of duty, and condescended to talk to the stranger no more.

Mrs. Neal appeared at the supper-table, pouring out the tea and attending to the wants of everyone. Her usually cheerful manner was a little overcast perhaps, and her eyes held a hint of anxiety in their clear depths, but that was all.

Maudie almost forgot to eat her supper, desperately hungry though she was, in her surprise at hearing

Tom Everson and the governess she had so despised talking of the people and the places they had seen and known.

Mrs. Neal was refined and easy in manner, fully justifying Jim's assertion that she was a lady. She was, moreover, a good talker, and the two kept the ball of conversation going, whilst Jim, Maudie, and Paul listened with varying degrees of interest and appreciation.

Then a storm of jealousy awoke in Maudie's heart, and but for the presence of Tom Everson at the board, she would have turned upon Mrs. Neal with an outburst of wrathful upbraiding, for no other reason than that the lady was cultured and refined, with a pleasing desire to adapt herself to any society in which she might be cast.

As it was, Maudie sulked, a most unusual state of affairs, as she had never before practised so much self-restraint as to refrain from an open exhibition of any anger she might chance to be feeling.

"Don't you feel well to-night, Maudie?" Jim ventured once, noticing her lack of appetite and her most unwonted silence.

"I'm all right," she retorted tartly, and refused to say any more.

"I suspect that Miss Belloc is suffering in her conscience for the ungenerous advantage she took of me this afternoon," Tom Everson said lightly.

"What did she do?" demanded Paul, who quite

forgot to be shy and diffident in presence of this genial stranger.

"She beat me!" he exclaimed, in a mock-tragic tone. "I'm not in training for rowing; I have hardly touched a pair of oars in the last twelve months, and in consequence I found myself decidedly second-best compared with your sister."

"Maudie is a rare one in a boat, and I've never seen her equal at fishing," burst out honest Jim, in warm eulogium of the hot-headed young step-sister whom he loved so well. "No matter what sort of fish she is after, she always seems to know by instinct how best to take it."

At any other time Maudie would have flushed with delight at such praise from her staid elder brother, but on this occasion it only served to add fuel to the fire of her anger.

"What nonsense you talk, Jim!" she cried petulantly, and frowning at him in a most repressive fashion, which had, however, an exactly opposite effect upon her brother from that which she had intended, for he thought she was disposed to underrate herself through modesty, and hastened to emphasize his previous statements.

"It isn't nonsense, it is downright fact, and you know it, Maudie, so where is the sense in being so over-bashful about it? Why, Mr. Everson, she can shoot a seal or spear a salmon as well or better than I can myself, and as to baiting otter-traps, there isn't

a man on the place can hold a candle to her in the business."

"Ah, quite an accomplished young lady, in fact! No wonder she does not care to learn how to be a domestic slave," rejoined Tom Everson, with a smile which made Maudie's face flame.

But she made no reply in words, only, rising from her unfinished supper, flounced out of the room with what was meant for an air of offended dignity, but which only succeeded in appearing ludicrous by reason of the violent passion into which she flung herself, and her ragged and unkempt appearance.

An uncomfortable silence dropped on the room for a moment after her angry exit, Jim and Paul wondering not a little what had offended Maudie so greatly, whilst Mrs. Neal and the visitor felt awkward and ill at ease.

It was Baby Ron who saved the situation, by banging on the table with his wooden spoon, and demanding "Glug, glug, glug!" at the top of his voice, that being his way of expressing his desire for a further helping of corn-porridge, sweetened with maple syrup, from which he made his supper.

Then Tom Everson and Jim began discussing fishery prospects, adjourning with their pipes to the big porch when supper was over, in order to finish their talk in the cool of the sun-setting.

Later on, when Mrs. Neal carried her small son, rosy and clean with his evening bath, to put him to

bed in the little chamber off the common room, she was struck by the sound of sobbing, which came from the closed door of Maudie's room.

Her first impulse was to enter and see what ailed the girl, but second thoughts made her hesitate, for Maudie was apt to resent hotly anything in the shape of interference in her affairs.

But when she had tucked Ron in for the night and seen his sleepy eyes close, Mrs. Neal knocked softly at the door, which was close to her own, and waited for permission to enter. None came, however, and the low pitiful sobbing continued, broken now and then by such dismal groans that the listener began to fear lest Maudie was really ill.

Made bold by anxiety, she ventured presently to open the door and enter, finding Maudie stretched in a spread-eagle fashion on the floor, crying as if her heart would break.

"My dear child, what is the matter?" cried Mrs. Neal, dropping on her knees on the floor by the side of the weeping girl.

"I am so wretched, I wish I was dead," returned Maudie, with sobbing vehemence.

"But why?" queried Mrs. Neal in great bewilderment.

"Everything is so horrid, and I'm so worried about—" but Maudie broke off abruptly, remembering in time her own expressed wish that no hint of the trouble about Basil should be given to Mrs. Neal.

"About what?" Mrs. Neal was patting and soothing the agitated girl back to composure, in the same fashion in which she dispelled the woes, real or fancied, of little Ron.

"Oh, nothing—it doesn't matter," rejoined Maudie, flushing and stammering in a confused fashion, then turning sullen under the other's anxious scrutiny.

"I wish you would let me help you, Maudie," Mrs. Neal burst out impulsively.

"I don't require any assistance, thank you. I am going to bed now to get a little sleep before the salmon-take," the girl answered in a distant tone, as she rose to a sitting position and commenced to gather up her wet dishevelled hair.

"You know what I mean," Mrs. Neal said reproachfully. "You always keep me so terribly at arm's-length, and now that you have a trouble you will not let me share it even in sympathy. The others do not shut me out of their confidence, why do you?"

For a moment a softened look stole into the girl's dark eyes, which were apt to be so hard in their brilliance. It was plain her heart was touched, and she was almost on the point of yielding to the kindly overtures, when there flashed into her mind the remembrance of how awkward, silent, and dull she had been forced to appear by the side of Mrs. Neal that evening.

The unlucky recollection stirred again the smouldering fires of her anger, and she replied with slow, cruel

deliberation, "Ah! that is because they do not see through you as I do."

Mrs. Neal shivered and recoiled as if from a blow. Was it possible this girl knew or suspected what she herself was fearing so greatly? Then she turned and fled, followed by the sound of Maudie's mocking laughter.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SALMON-TAKE

NIGHT was only just beginning to pale into dawn, when Maudie, with Jim and Tom Everson, stepped into their boat, and, paddling out of the harbour, took their way up the Inlet to its landward extremity.

It was at this point that a brawling little river emptied itself into the sea, after a short but merry career down from the hills. But in its course it slid over deep pools, and swirled round big boulders of rock and limestone, making foaming cascades, and narrow tortuous channels at unexpected places. It was a river loved of fish, which leaped and gambolled in its cool shadowy depths.

Across some of the channels at the river's mouth, where it tumbled over big boulders into the Inlet, Jim's Indians had been busy since midnight in stretching wide lengths of netting, fastening these with big sharp-pointed stakes driven in here and there, wherever a holding-place could be found for them.

It was highly dangerous work, for it was of necessity performed in the dark, whilst the treacherous slippery boulders seemed expressly designed as

traps for the unwary, as perilous a foothold as could well be imagined in the gloom and uncertainty of the night.

But the Indians had a tenacity of grip whether of hand or foot that was denied to whiteskins, and so the hazardous task of netting the river was by common consent always left to these surer-footed natives.

The work was complete by the time the party in the boat reached the spot, and the Indians rolled in their blankets were snatching a brief unrestful slumber before the work of the day began.

Maudie's mood, though defiant still, was not irritably passionate as it had been at supper on the previous evening. And although she was quieter than her wont, she answered readily enough when either her brother or Tom Everson spoke to her.

She was privately very much ashamed of her display of temper; and sorry, too, for the way in which she had flouted Mrs. Neal's proffered friendship. But this she would not have admitted on any account, priding herself as she did on never repenting at leisure for hasty fits of unreasonableness.

Her trouble about Basil was pushed into the background for the time being, and she would have been bubbling over with delight at the prospect of sport but for her absurd behaviour on the previous evening.

The remembrance made her self-conscious and uncomfortable. No girl cares to belittle herself in the eyes of a stranger, and Maudie was quite abnormally

sensitive on this point; therefore she became defiant through a morbid fear of being laughed at.

Tom Everson was so completely indifferent to the varying changes of her mood, however, that she soon ceased to think about herself, and was ready, when the drive commenced, to enjoy the excitement to the full.

The boat had been wedged in between two huge boulders, close to the biggest net; but now Maudie and Tom Everson, both armed with spears, were alone in it, for Jim had taken up a position on the top of a big slippery rock close to another net, and the three waited in breathless silence the coming of the fish.

Once Maudie broke this silence by saying in a loud whisper, "Jim, Jim, I'm sure you are not safe; that rock is as slippery as possible, and the first time you strike you will topple over."

But Jim only shook his head in a warning fashion, holding up his hand to her to be quiet; and she dared say no more, for already they could hear the fierce yells and cries of the Indians, who were thrashing the water higher up the stream, and making as much noise as possible, in order to frighten the fish and drive them down-river towards the nets.

To the people who are forced by necessity to toil for daily bread come many a compensation and relief, denied to those who, lapped in luxury, have no need to bestir themselves.

So to Jim Belloc that morning there was granted

a respite of forgetfulness from that mental torture he had been enduring concerning Basil, which had driven all hope of slumber from his eyes during the brief period when he had flung himself down to rest.

If he had been a rich man, doubtless his trouble would have hugged him so tightly that escape would have been all but impossible; as it was, by the time he caught the first gleam of a darting silvery fin, and lifted his spear to strike, his worry dropped from him as if it had never been, and for a while he was wholly and entirely happy.

The salmon swept into the net in crowds, darting, struggling, diving to escape the cruel spear; but the anglers were clever and experienced, striking here and there with unerring aim, impaling the luckless fish, and by a dexterous sweep of the spear landing them in the boat or flinging them on the bank. Tom Everson, who most of the time played the part of an onlooker, even though he was, like the others, armed with a spear, was fascinated and amazed by the grace of Maudie's movements, and the agile ease with which she wielded her weapon.

So absorbed was he in watching her that he forgot to look at Jim, or even to notice how the Indians were getting nearer and nearer for the final battue.

Suddenly a big salmon leaped in the water, its silvery sides catching a gleam of the rising sun, and Jim, who was nearest, lunged forward to strike. Maudie at the same moment flung her spear at a

twenty-pounder in the same direction, intending to draw it back by the cord with which, as a necessary precaution, she had fastened it to her arm.

But just then Jim slipped, catching the full force of Maudie's well-aimed blow in his leg, and with a sharp cry fell backwards into the water, dragging Maudie after him, for the spear was still embedded in his flesh, and her arm was fast to the handle of the spear.

It was a ghastly moment, and Tom Everson lost his head completely, as, making a grab at Maudie's skirt when she slid over the side, he missed it and tumbled into the water after her.

But she kept her head, although the wrench had dislocated her arm, and when she came to the surface reached out and caught at one of the stakes supporting the net, and, clinging to it with her uninjured hand, shouted to them to save Jim first, he being rendered helpless by his terrible wound.

The Indians plunged boldly into the water, notwithstanding the very considerable risk of being sucked down by the currents and drowned, and were making valiant efforts to disentangle Jim from the mass of net and struggling fish. Tom Everson had come to the surface, and, dashing the water from his eyes, swam to the spot also to assist in the work of rescue; whilst Maudie, plucky and cool-headed, although suffering horrible pain in her arm, shouted orders and encouragements to the rescuers, and would not allow

the cord to be cut, since it served to anchor Jim's body to her, and so lessened the danger of his being swept down by the current.

They had just succeeded by Herculean efforts in getting his bulky form free, and were hoisting it into the boat, when the stake to which Maudie was clinging gave way without any warning, and she was once more precipitated into the water.

CHAPTER IX

A BRACE OF INVALIDS

THE household on the Inlet were astir at an early hour on the morning of the salmon-take, and everyone was as busy as could be in getting ready for the starting of the schooner.

Paul had been in the curing-shed since dawn packing fish, Jim having been unable to finish on the previous evening, and when at seven o'clock the boy came in to his breakfast he looked wan and heavy-eyed, as if worn out with the extra toil.

"I've finished, thank goodness, and every basket is tied down, carried on board, and stowed away!" he exclaimed wearily, dropping into the nearest chair and looking thoroughly done up.

"Ah! you want some breakfast, I can see, and as the coffee is just ready you shall have it without waiting another minute," Mrs. Neal said, rising from her seat at the table under the window and going out to the cooking-stove in the next room, whence she brought in the coffee-pot and a dish of fish rissoles, fried to a delicate golden brown.

"Oh, I say, how good they look!" and Paul's eyes brightened as he nodded his head in the direction of the savoury dish.

"Come and try them; they were made to be eaten, and not to be looked at merely," Mrs. Neal said, heaping a generous portion on his plate and pouring him out a cup of steaming coffee.

The wan look disappeared from Paul's face, and the heaviness departed from his eyes as he ate. "How nice things are when you have touched them!" he said. 'I simply couldn't bear cod the way we used to cook it."

"I fancy cod is like most other things, only endurable when properly prepared," she answered with a smile, going back to the table under the window, where she was writing a letter to her husband, to be sent by the schooner to Victoria, and there posted for Dawson city.

But it is difficult work writing letters which may be a year, perhaps more, in getting to their destination, and the smile quickly faded from her face as she bent again over her paper. There was some lingering bitterness in her heart too, which prevented her from writing down the loving things she might have said. She could not forget the cruel eagerness with which he had flung her and little Ron on the charity of Jim Belloc, in order that he might be free to take his chance of fortune amid Alaskan snows.

So the letter was cold and laboured in its tone, written with evident effort, and only natural in the part pertaining to little Ron. It was easy to write of the baby, however, and Mrs. Neal filled the remainder

of her sheet with descriptions of his progress, of his bright, winning way, and his funny, incoherent attempts at talking. But she sighed as she wrote her name at the bottom, and folded the paper to fit the envelope; she thought of the little home they had planned to make at Alberni, and how they had looked forward to starting life together in this new land.

But lust of gold had spoiled it all, and made a breach between husband and wife, which perchance might never be healed.

It was thoughts like these that made Ella's face so stern in its sorrowful gravity, as she busied herself preparing a fresh lot of rissoles for the salmon-catchers when they should return, and kneading a batch of bread for that day's requirements.

The dough had risen, and the loaves were coming to a rich brown in the oven, before there was any sign of the return of the fishing-party, while Mrs. Neal had peered many times into the covered pan where the rissoles were keeping warm, and thought what a pity it was that no one was ready to eat them.

Then Paul, who had been busy since breakfast in arranging some last items in the preparation of the schooner, came hurrying into the house white-faced and trembling.

"Mrs. Neal," he gasped, "there has been a bad accident up the river. Jim is hurt, had a spear in his leg, and Maudie has been nearly drowned, Tyke says.

He hurried home with the little boat, so that we might get their beds ready, and not be so frightened when they came."

"How soon will they be here?" asked Mrs. Neal, turning pale at first, but quickly recovering her composure as she began to move swiftly about, getting ready to meet this sudden and unexpected emergency.

"Tyke said in half an hour or so," Paul replied, doing his best to second Mrs. Neal's efforts at getting the place in order for the reception of the sufferers.

They spent no more time in talking until everything was done which could be done; then as they stood in the porch, watching for the first sight of the big canoe coming down the Inlet, Mrs. Neal remembered that she had never enquired how the accident happened.

She asked Paul if he knew. The Tyke had returned with the little boat to the help of the fishing-party, so she and Paul were left to wait with what patience they might.

Hooee had taken Ron to pick berries on the hill at the back of the homestead, so that the child might not be in the way. The absence of everyone except the two in the porch gave a lonely deserted feeling to the house, while the brooding quiet was like the hush before the breaking of a storm.

"Tyke said that Jim slipped just as Maudie swung her spear. She most often throws her spear at a fish she can't reach by stabbing, and so the thing struck

Jim in the leg. Maudie was dragged into the water too, and Mr. Everson toppled in after her. But the serious part came when they were lifting Jim into the boat, for the stake to which Maudie was clinging gave way, and she was flung into the water again, only this time into a very dangerous current among the rocks. Tyke said she must have been drowned then, but for the cord by which the spear was fastened to her arm. As it was, Mr. Everson managed to drag her out more dead than alive."

"What a frightful business!" exclaimed Mrs. Neal with a shiver. "And what a host of dangers one has to face on the water!"

"I hate it!" cried Paul, looking fearfully out over the gleaming surface of the Inlet. "And I never can understand what makes Jim and Maudie love it so much."

"It is always well to be fond of what brings one daily bread," returned Mrs. Neal. Then she said, with a quick touch on his arm, "Here come the boats, they are just rounding the bend into the harbour-pool."

Paul shook himself as a dog does when it has been in the water. He was horribly nervous and frightened, feeling that he would like to run away and hide himself if he could, in order to avoid the sight of his brother and sister in their bruised and battered condition. But Mrs. Neal hurried down to the landing-place, intent on rendering all possible assistance, and

braced by the necessities of the situation into a forgetfulness of self which was simply superb.

Jim had swooned from pain and loss of blood, and was lifted from the boat and carried up to the house, as senseless and helpless as if he were already dead.

Mrs. Neal supported his head, whilst Tom Everson and two of the Indians carried him to the house. But Maudie, though wet to the skin, and gray with the acute pain in her arm, walked up the slope unaided, crying bitterly at the sorry plight of her brother.

"What shall we do for a doctor?" asked Mrs. Neal, wondering with sudden dismay in her heart how far away the nearest medical practitioner lived.

"We must do without one, I am afraid," Tom Everson said, trying to look as brave as he could, although it was pretty evident that his courage was oozing out at his finger-tips.

"The nearest doctor is at Victoria, or at least at Esquimault, which is about the same thing. Oh, Mrs. Neal, can't you dress his wound? It is only a flesh cut, but he will die if it is not attended to at once!" cried Maudie, in a sharp, agonized tone, looking as if she were on the verge of a swoon herself.

Mrs. Neal gave a swift glance at Tom Everson, but perceiving that he was quaking visibly, rallied her own courage to meet the emergency.

"I will do what I can. But, Maudie, don't stay here, dear; the sight of the wound may make you feel faint," she said, collecting one or two things needful

for the task, and then stooping over Jim, who had been laid on the table in the common room, because he was too wet to be put to bed.

"I shall stay, it was all my fault that he was hurt at all; the least I can do is to see him through his trouble as far as I can, poor old Jim!" sobbed the girl in a heart-broken fashion. Then, catching sight of Mrs. Neal's preparations, she cried out sharply, "Oh, what have you got that needle for?"

"Because I am going to sew up the wound when I have washed it, then it will heal faster. I have seen that kind of thing done once before, so I shall not be afraid. I only hope the spear did not cut or injure any muscles or tendons," Mrs. Neal said, as she began to unwind the rough bandage which Tom Everson and the Indians had fastened round the injured limb to stay the bleeding.

It was a gruesome task, but her courage never once flagged, and she did her work as quickly and skilfully as could be expected, seeing what a 'prentice hand at surgery she was.

The edges of the wound being drawn together and sewn with silk, and the limb bandaged, Mrs. Neal called upon her helpers to assist her in getting the sufferer to bed, hoping to accomplish this before Jim's senses returned to him.

In this she was successful, thanks to Tom Everson and Paul, who ably seconded all her endeavours when once the surgical operation was at an end.

Then, leaving Paul to watch by his bed, and exhorting Mr. Everson to borrow a suit of Jim's clothes and get himself into dry garments, she hurried away to attend to her other invalid.

"I'm afraid it is broken," she said, making an examination of Maudie's arm, which already was commencing to inflame and swell.

"It is only out of joint, I am sure. I felt it slip out, and the agony was awful," Maudie replied with quivering lips. "Do you think you could wrench it into place again, Mrs. Neal?"

"I am sure I could not," returned that lady hastily, going white to her lips at the bare suggestion of any more surgery.

"Then Katchewan must do it," said Maudie, with a look of grim endurance coming into her white face. "He is that big Indian with a wart on the tip of his nose, and he always sets the bones of his tribe. Go and tell him to come, will you, for the sooner he begins the sooner it will be done."

Mrs. Neal departed without a word, crossing the common room, and going out to the porch, about which the Indian helpers were gathered in a silent group.

The man with the wart on his nose was not hard to find, but he was such a fierce, revolting-looking specimen of his kind, that Mrs. Neal felt more than half afraid of him.

His style of conversation was as peculiar as his

appearance, and consisted for the most part of "Ah" and "Eh", uttered in a sharp loud key, or inflected with varying expressions to convey his meaning.

He understood directly what was required of him, and stalked into the house in the rear of the lady, with a grim majesty of deportment which gave a dignity to his uncouth figure.

"Is it broken, Katchewan?" demanded Maudie, trying to look as brave as she could.

"Ah!" ejaculated the red man, with that degree of inflection which plainly meant no.

"Will it hurt much?" she asked, wincing at his touch, as his long dusky fingers gripped the soft flesh of her arm, feeling bones, tendons, and muscles, in order to determine in what direction the injury lay.

"Eh!" he interjected, with such startling emphasis that Mrs. Neal gave a nervous jump, and felt as bad as if she herself were the subject of his ministrations.

"Well, go on and get it done as sharp as you can," commanded Maudie, in her most dictatorial tone, just as if she were issuing some order connected with fishing, and desired to hurry the movements of Katchewan.

"Eh!" As he fired off this last interjection his fingers tightened their grip, his feet planted themselves farther apart on the floor; he gave a quick twisting wrench, and the dislocated joint was in place again.

Maudie bore it with the calm of a stoic, but when it was over, and with a final loudly ejaculated "Eh!" Katchewan stalked away through the open door, she tumbled in a sobbing heap into Mrs. Neal's kind arms, and cried like a baby.

"Oh, you have been brave, the very pluckiest girl I have ever seen!" murmured Mrs. Neal consolingly.

"I am not; I am an awful coward, if you only knew!" cried Maudie, shrinking and shivering from the reaction. "But you have been like an angel from heaven to us to-day, and I will never be horrid to you again—never!"

Mrs. Neal caught her breath in a little sob of thankfulness. The ordeal had been sharp whilst it lasted, but this unexpected result more than compensated for all.

CHAPTER X

TOM EVERSON'S DILEMMA

THE salmon had been secured, and now it must be marketed somehow, or the morning's work and all the labour of netting the stream would be thrown away.

But none of the Indians knew enough of navigation to take the schooner round to Victoria; and Tom Everson was on the horns of a very considerable dilemma.

He wanted to get back himself, one of his reasons in leaving the police-boat being the chance of a speedy return to the city in Jim Belloc's schooner. He knew a little navigation himself, quite enough, he felt sure, to manage the voyage with such assistance as the native crew could give him. But the difficulty was the return voyage, for the schooner would have to come back to the Inlet.

It was Mrs. Neal who provided him with a solution of the problem. "You will be sure to find some seafaring man in Victoria who would be willing to bring the schooner back for a consideration. Make the best bargain you can for Mr. Belloc, and I believe it will answer, at least it will solve the difficulty."

"It seems horridly mean to go off and leave you in such a fix. Do you think a doctor ought to come back in the schooner to look after Belloc?"

"No, I am sure there is no necessity for one; and think of the expense it would be. Mr. Belloc will do well if he will lie quietly in bed until his wound heals. And Maudie's injury is only a question of a sore shoulder and a few bruises, thanks to her own pluck in making Katchewan wrench the bone into place," Mrs. Neal said, feeling that they had come out of the disaster so far much better than they could possibly have hoped to do.

"Very well, then, the sooner I am off the better. I suppose the boy wouldn't like to go the trip, for the sake of sharing the responsibility with me and bossing the new hand on the voyage back?"

"Paul?" But Mrs. Neal's thoughts went with a swift recollection to the boy's avowed horror of the sea, and she made up her mind in a flash. "I could not spare him, Mr. Everson; it is not to be thought of ev[illegible] Just imagine my condition, left here with two invalids on my hands and no one to help me, for Hooee does not count, as she will have Ron to take care of."

"It would be awkward, I know, and the boy seems wonderfully handy. Well, I will do my best," he said, yet with a slightly rueful air, as if he thought privately that Mrs. Neal might have made the effort to let Paul go.

A few directions from Jim, and Tom Everson went

aboard the schooner, there being just time to save the tide.

"If I had not been soft enough to bother myself about Basil Belloc's business I should not have got into this muddle," he told himself as he walked the deck, too much weighed down by the responsibilities of his position to have any thought of rest during the trip to the city. But he was a good-hearted fellow despite his grumbling, and would cheerfully have done as much again to serve a friend.

Luck was with him this time, sailor's luck the native crew called it, and avowed their readiness to sail with him anywhere he chose to go, because that voyage to Victoria was a record in point of time and the ease with which it was accomplished, a plain evidence in the eyes of his superstitious subordinates that he was born to be a sailor, yet the sea would never be his grave.

But despite all this happy augury, no man could have been more thankful than Tom Everson was when he found himself on *terra firma* once more, with the schooner safely moored alongside the quay. The rest of his task would be comparatively easy, so he told himself, for Jim's agent would attend to the selling of the fish, and Gibson, the shipping agent, would know just where to find the right man to take the schooner round to the Inlet again.

Before he had gone many steps, however, he chanced upon the very man he had set out to seek, namely,

Mr. Gibson, the urbane and courteous shipping agent, who was, moreover, a walking encyclopedia of useful and up-to-date information, and who knew everybody else's business as well as he knew his own, which was very well indeed.

"Ah, Everson, my boy, I was wondering where you had got to; what a bad business this is about young Belloc!"

Tom Everson felt a shiver go the length of his spine, then pulled himself up quickly on reflecting that Gibson had probably heard of Jim's disaster.

"Yes, but it might have been worse; it is nothing but a flesh wound, I am hoping," he rejoined, as composedly as he could.

"A flesh wound, indeed! murder is murder, whether it's broken bones or flesh cuts, I should say," retorted Mr. Gibson brusquely.

"What do you mean?" gasped Tom, with a feeling of having had a bucket of icy cold water shot over him.

"Why, I mean this charge they are trumping up against young Basil Belloc, of having been concerned in the death of Preece Morgan. I see Jim Belloc's schooner has just come in, and I'm going down to the quay to warn him of what's afloat. Not that any jury would ever bring it in anything but manslaughter, seeing that the poor chap must have had no end of provocation, and was doubtless pretty much knocked about as well."

"Jim Belloc!" cried Tom Everson, with a strange hysterical tendency to laughter, which was partly the outcome of the nervous strain consequent upon the voyage, and partly due to anxiety on Basil's account. "Why, the poor fellow's abed with an awful gash in his leg from a salmon-spear; indeed, it was little short of a miracle that he was not killed outright."

"Then who brought the schooner round? Not Basil surely?" and Mr. Gibson's face puckered into such a ludicrous expression of concern that Tom, unable any longer to do successful battle against his overmastering hysterical tendency, burst into a shout of laughter.

Mr. Gibson looked first amazed and then offended. "I didn't think it was in you, Everson, to make sport of a man in a fix like that, more especially as you and Basil were always such friends."

"I make sport of him?" cried Tom, his honest indignation banishing his laughter. "As if I should ever think of such a thing! I laughed because I brought the schooner round from the Inlet myself. Can you fancy me posing as a master-mariner?"

"I can fancy your doing most anything that would help somebody else," returned the other in a mollified tone. Then he asked anxiously — "But where is Basil?"

"How should I know? Gone to the Klondyke, I suppose, if nothing worse has happened to him."

"I didn't know whether he had managed to find his way to the Inlet by some means. In fact, I had been hoping that he might have done so, for it is pretty clear to my mind that he can't have gone to Alaska."

"Why not?" demanded Tom.

"Because to get gold you must have gold, and the poor chap hadn't any—not a cent."

"But I say he had, for I know Jim gave him two hundred dollars the day they parted, and Basil might have had more if he'd spoken the word," Tom said hotly, as eager to defend the elder Belloc from the imputation of meanness as he was to champion the cause of his own particular chum Basil.

"He may have had it, but he lost it. That's where the trouble comes in," said Mr. Gibson, with a mournful shake of his head.

"What do you mean?" asked Tom. "Has anything more turned up since I went away a few days ago in the police-boat?"

"A good deal may happen in a few days," rejoined the other sententiously. "And the fact of the matter is, that they've found a letter among Preece Morgan's effects, which points pretty conclusively to Basil being the man who had most reason to have that quarrel with Preece Morgan that ended in the old man's death."

"What was in the letter?" asked Tom brusquely,

feeling it a duty incumbent on him to take the part of his friend, since Jim was perforce unable to take up the cudgels on his brother's behalf.

"I can't remember it word for word, but the gist of it was that Basil was reproaching Morgan for having won all his (Basil's) money at cards, and then refusing to help him with a loan, so that he might get to the Klondyke with borrowed money, and threatening what he'd do if Morgan would not stand his friend."

"The Bellocs don't touch cards; and that doesn't sound like Basil either," asserted Tom, with a snort of indignation.

"Well, as to that, if Basil had never touched cards before when he was under Jim's wing, as you may say, he might easily have yielded to temptation when he got in with Morgan's lot, and had his fling at gambling like the rest. Though how any sane man can be so lost to prudence and common sense as to stake his whole capital on a fling of the dice or a trick at cards, is more than I can understand."

"Or I either," replied Tom in a worried tone. Then he burst out angrily, "But I can't bring myself to believe that he wrote that letter. Pen and ink were never much in Basil's line, nor Jim's either for the matter of that."

"You can't swear to his writing, I suppose, can you?" asked Mr. Gibson, with a sudden lightening of the gloom of his face, for he had a genuine liking

for the Bellocs, and gladly hailed any prospect of doing the brothers a good turn.

Tom shook his head in a dubious fashion. "I'm afraid not, but I'll go and see the letter. I suppose the police will allow me to do that. And if there seems a shadow of a doubt about its being Basil's handwriting, I'll send for Maudie to come and decide the matter."

"Who is Maudie?" demanded Mr. Gibson.

Honest Tom flushed awkwardly. "I beg her pardon. I ought to have said Miss Belloc."

"Oh, that is the sister, I suppose,—the one Jim was wanting a governess for! But she is only a little girl, is she?"

A smile flickered over Tom's face at the question. He was thinking of Maudie as he had seen her clinging to that treacherous stake in mid-stream, and shouting to them not to trouble about her, but to save Jim first. "She is bigger than you, anyhow," he answered; "and I'm not so sure that she isn't as tall as I am, or near it. She can lick me into fits at handling a boat, and I reckon she is about the pluckiest girl that I have ever seen."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Gibson, with a long-drawn intonation, whereat Tom Everson coloured more hotly than before, and was furiously angry with himself for his unaccountable stupidity.

To divert attention from himself he plunged into the question of finding a man to take the schooner

back to the Inlet, and found, as he had expected, that Mr. Gibson knew exactly where to find the right person to undertake the work.

This settled, Tom went off at once to look at the letter which had led to the issuing of a warrant for the arrest of Basil Belloc.

He had only once or twice seen any specimens of Basil's caligraphy, and even then they were only items jotted down in pencil concerning stores to be taken back in the schooner, and details of that sort. Indeed, in his own mind he very much doubted whether Basil had ever embarked on such an ambitious literary venture as a letter, and certainly if he should chance to be so greatly daring, the result would be ill-written and worse spelled, education not being a strong point with the Belloc brothers.

His demand for a sight of the epistle was acceded to after some little demur, and then he found that not only was the writing far beyond Basil's attainments, but, so far as he could see, there was not an error in spelling from beginning to end.

CHAPTER XI

A NIGHT OF WATCHING

IT was not the way of Maudie to do anything by halves, and therefore when she resolved on liking Mrs. Neal, she accorded that lady a passionate devotion which was almost startling by reason of its intensity.

But the change had come exactly at the right time, for Jim was so ill from shock in the days which followed the departure of the schooner that Mrs. Neal's courage would hardly have endured the strain put upon it, but for Maudie's sympathy and help.

The quiet, unemotional Jim was so wildly delirious from the combined effects of the shock and the wound, that Mrs. Neal and Paul could not keep him in bed unaided on the night after Tom Everson had departed.

"Paul, you must call Maudie; Hooee would be of no use, she is too frightened," Mrs. Neal said sharply, after a desperate attempt of Jim's to roll out of bed, which nearly resulted in his getting the bandages of his wound unfastened, and thus risking its bursting out bleeding again.

Paul slipped hurriedly across the common room to

Maudie's door, and, rousing her, raced back to Jim's bedside again, arriving just in time to prevent Mrs. Neal from being overpowered by his brother, who was asserting with much vehemence that he must get up and go fishing whilst the tide served.

Maudie's face was as scared as Paul's at the sound of Jim's raving, but she quickly settled the question of how to keep him in bed, when she understood how necessary to the well-being of his wound it was that he should lie still.

"We will tie him to the bedstead, and then if he wriggles I will sit upon him," she said, reaching down a coil of stout cord which hung on a peg near the door, and beginning to untwist it with one hand.

"But it may hurt him to be tied down," protested Paul, to whom the suggestion sounded barbaric.

"Mrs. Neal says it will do him more harm to roll about like this, so we must keep him still somehow. Oh, if only I had two hands to use!" she cried petulantly, coming to difficulties presently with the cord she was uncoiling.

Paul came to her assistance, and together they fastened the cord so that it should prevent Jim from flinging himself from side to side, or attempting the risk of a sitting posture.

"Try if you can quiet him by talking, Maudie; my voice is strange to him, and Paul's has no effect," said Mrs. Neal, who feared lest he should do himself some serious injury by his excited condition.

"Why are you so anxious to be off fishing by this tide, Jim?" Maudie asked, sitting on the side of the bed, and stroking his hot face with her left hand. She knew so much more of tides and fish than the other two watchers, that already she had begun to suspect that there was more method in his madness than they had any idea of.

"I want to have another take of houlakan, Maudie, and this tide will sweep them inshore again. We may get half a ton or more, if only we are quick," he said, eagerly plucking at the blankets with his strong brown hands, as if he would rend them into shreds.

"I'm not so sure that houlakan pay for the trouble of drying," she objected, in such an equable, business-like tone that he left off dragging at the blankets in order to listen to her. "You see, Jim, petroleum is getting so cheap now, that even natives prefer it to houlakan torches; and then it makes such a lot of work for such a little return. It would be awkward, too, fishing outside the Inlet if there is any sort of swell on, now that the schooner has gone round to the town."

"Still, there is a little money in houlakan, if it isn't much; and I must make money, I want it so badly now, Maudie," he said, lying back on his pillow, prepared to argue the point.

"There's no such desperate need for making money just at present, that I can see," rejoined Maudie. "We are doing very well, paying our way and put-

ting a little by to tide us over bad seasons. You can't better that very much, unless you are going in for being a millionaire straight off."

"I must have money, a lot of it, to help poor Basil out of this fix," he said, dropping his voice a little and gazing apprehensively round, yet not noticing that both Paul and Mrs. Neal were close by his bed.

Maudie flushed crimson, then remembering that she had resolved to trust Mrs. Neal with this secret of Basil's trouble, recovered directly from her momentary confusion.

"Don't worry about Basil, Jim dear, he must get out of the fix as he got into it," she said in a hard tone, only now the hardness was for the absent brother, and not for the one lying helpless before her. "If he is innocent of any share in hurting that old man, then it shouldn't be difficult to make people believe it, whilst if he is guilty he deserves to suffer for it."

"Hush, hush! Don't talk like that!" exclaimed Jim, with a wild light in his eyes that frightened her, though he made no effort to raise himself in his bed or toss from side to side. "I tell you, Maudie, that Basil, though as innocent as you or I, may have to suffer as if he were guilty, unless he has someone uncommon clever to defend him, and that is what I want the money for. I've my suspicions, child, as to who is at the bottom of this business, and I mean to see the thing through, if I have to sell the

schooner and mortgage this place up to the chimney to do it."

"Whom do you suspect?" she asked, more from a desire to quiet him than from any thought of what he might say; and Mrs. Neal's face was in the shadow, otherwise its sudden ghastly paleness might have warned her of what was coming.

"If you ask me what I think about it," replied Jim, in a cautious undertone, looking round him with the same apprehensive yet unseeing gaze, "I should say I can't help feeling that Neal is somehow mixed up in it. I never did like that fellow from the first; it set me dead against him to see how eager he was to get rid of his wife and child. Do you think if that poor little woman had belonged to me I would have let her take her chance among strangers?"

"I am sure you would not," replied Maudie fervently, and then was relieved to see Mrs. Neal slip quietly from the room and vanish into the darkness beyond.

"Maudie, what does Jim mean about Basil being in trouble?" queried Paul in a frightened whisper, creeping closer to her.

"I'll tell you another time, but perhaps it is nothing to worry about after all," she said hastily, trying hard to believe that things were not so bad as she had feared.

"And when you come to think about it, Neal was not unlike our Basil—same height, same build, and

pretty much the same colour, hair and complexion," went on Jim, paying no heed to Mrs. Neal's hasty exit or Paul's frightened whisper, but looking straight at Maudie, and talking as sanely as ever he had done in his life before, and with only the wild light of delirium in his eyes to betray his real condition.

"I don't understand how Mr. Neal could have wrought any harm to our Basil," objected Maudie, partly to soothe Jim, and partly to reassure the listener outside, if perchance she still lingered within earshot.

"But I'm afraid he has done him an ill turn, I've got the feeling of it," the sufferer moaned, rolling his head in a weary, unrestful fashion upon his pillow.

"It is more likely you have got the sensation of that awful dig I gave you with my salmon-spear, and that is what makes you mix things up so badly. Go to sleep, Jim dear, and in the morning you'll understand all the muddle better," she said coaxingly, bending over him, and compelling him by the sheer force of her stronger will to shut his eyes and sink into slumber.

Paul watched her in bewildered amazement; never in all his life before had he seen his sister display any sort of tenderness of heart. How he had longed in his feeble, delicate childhood for someone to mother him, yet had never known any maternal affection saving what Hooee had bestowed upon him! Hooee,

whose own brown baby had come to an accidental and untimely end on the very day when he, Paul, was born.

At first a pang of jealousy throbbed in his heart, that Maudie should lavish such love on her step-brother, when for himself she had never shown any warmer feeling than liking or toleration.

Then he began dimly to understand that it was the unusual circumstances that had evoked such a state of things. Jim's hurt had been dealt him by Maudie's hand, accidentally of course, yet that fact hardly detracted anything from the keen self-reproach under which she suffered. And the fact that she was to blame for Jim's condition was why, for the first time, Maudie displayed such loving gentleness, and gave the astonished Paul a glimpse into the real strength and worth of her nature.

He was still gazing at her in a dazed wonderment, when, finding Jim asleep, she straightened herself up from her stooping posture, and, whispering to Paul to call her if he woke, passed into the darkness of the room beyond in search of Mrs. Neal.

The change from the lighted bed-room made it difficult for her to see anything at first, although even here the gloom was lifting, for day was breaking, and the first gray gleams of dawn were stealing through the windows.

Then a smothered sob caught her ear, and, going round to the farther side of the square fireplace, she

saw Mrs. Neal lying face downwards on the big wooden settle which stood on that side of the room.

"Oh, why do you cry over the rubbish a mad man utters? For there is no denying that poor old Jim has been mad to-night," Maudie said, laying her hand with a consoling touch on the other's shoulder.

"But it was so dreadful to hear, and all the while to be unable to give it the lie," Mrs. Neal said, sitting up, and showing a face haggard and distorted with grief.

"Where would have been the use of denying what he had no sense to understand, poor fellow?" argued Maudie, in her cool logical fashion. Then she suddenly stole her uninjured arm round the older woman's neck, saying impulsively, "How you must hate us for the way we have treated you since you came to the Inlet. First there was my horrid behaviour, and now poor old Jim seems to have taken the same line, the only difference being that it is your husband he abuses and not you. But then, you know, he is clean crazy just now."

A sob struggled in Mrs. Neal's throat, and the dread in her heart became a sharp physical pain, as she gently put aside Maudie's caressing arm and rose to her feet.

"It is, as you say, very silly to pay serious heed to delirious wanderings, and I am not usually so foolish. But all the strain of yesterday and to-night have unnerved me, I think," she said, her lips quivering,

and her voice showing a strong tendency to break down.

"Of course you are worn out, and none of us have taken the least care of you. I don't believe you have had a mouthful to eat or drink since the accident. Do just lie back on the settle, and I will go and get Paul to make you some breakfast. I would do it myself if I were sharper at that sort of thing, but I've always had a soul above cooking, and so I haven't a notion how to set about it," she said ruefully, beginning to realize that an experimental knowledge of cookery might prove exceedingly useful in an emergency.

The breakfast prepared by Paul, with Hooee's help, did them all good; whilst Jim, who slept for three or four hours, awoke with no remembrance of last night's delirious imaginings.

A few days of rest sufficed to make Maudie's arm well again, and heal the bruises and cuts she had sustained in being dashed against the rocks when the stake to which she was clinging gave way.

Jim, though making good progress, was longer in recovering, being only able at the end of a week to leave his bed and creep out to a seat in the big porch.

That was the day when the schooner returned from Victoria. The Tyke as usual was the first to see the approaching vessel and announce its coming to the other dwellers on the Inlet.

For a wonder, Maudie was not afloat when the

tidings were shouted that the schooner was standing in from the open sea. But, having to do Jim's work as well as her own, she was obliged to spend a considerable portion of her time in the curing-sheds, in order to see that the Indian women did their work properly: those dusky dames being afflicted with the same tendency to shirking which is epidemic in most parts of the world.

Hooee came round to the sheds with little Ron in her arms, to bring the news, and Maudie hurried to finish the work she was engaged in, so that she might be ready to watch the schooner enter the harbour-pool.

Hooee did not stay to watch her. The coloured woman had taken to ways of new vigour and activity since the advent of Mrs. Neal at the Inlet, whilst her devotion to Ron was only equalled by the affection she had lavished on Paul during his delicate childhood. Ignorant she was, and as superstitious and dirty as the rest of her class, but her faithfulness and devotion were not to be excelled, while the maternal instinct in her rose to the height of a passion, and she mothered every weakly thing that came within her reach.

Maudie was out on the landing-stage below the house when the schooner came riding into the harbour-pool as gracefully as a water-bird, bowing and ducking in a series of dipping curtsies, which did the heart of her owner good as he watched her coming from his invalid couch on the porch.

But Maudie's heart was fluttering wildly, for the man on deck reminded her of Basil, though where the likeness began or ended she could not have told. But only it was a likeness, and when the stranger lifted his cap in courteous salute to her, the action might have been that of her absent brother, so identical was the peculiar sweep of arm and flourishing motion of the cap.

CHAPTER XII

MAUDIE'S LETTER

THORPE TILNEY had been adrift for some time in Victoria looking for a chance of remunerative work. He had changed his last dollar, and was wondering whether it might not be prudent to start as a dock-labourer, even though he did hold a captain's certificate, when Mr. Gibson met him in the street, and asked him to take Jim Belloc's schooner back to the Inlet.

Naturally he closed with this opportune offer of employment without delay, and would have been willing to set off that same day, had not some necessary repairs hindered the sailing of the schooner on her return voyage.

He already had a very fair knowledge of that part of the Vancouver coast, having made several voyages from Esquimault to Nootka Sound and Alberni, and as he handled the schooner with considerable skill and daring, the trip to the Inlet was made under the usual time taken for the voyage.

Maudie greeted him with some restraint, instinctively resenting the bold glance of admiration he flung at her as he came ashore.

"My brother would like to see you at once, if you will come to the house," she said, turning to pilot him up the slope to the porch.

"Ah, poor fellow, is he better?" asked Captain Tilney, his manner a little apologetic, as if already he was conscious of having displeased her.

"Oh yes, thank you! he is very much better, and will soon be able to do his work as usual," she answered, but not looking at him, for, despite his intangible likeness to Basil, there was something about him which filled her with dislike.

"By the way, Miss Belloc, I have a letter for you, which I was charged to deliver the moment I arrived," said the captain, fumbling in his jacket pocket, and producing a packet which he handed to Maudie.

"A letter for me!" she exclaimed in swift amazement, then caught herself up before saying any more, at the same time blushing deeply, not choosing to tell this stranger, who had made such an unpleasant first impression on her, that she had never received a letter before.

But Thorpe Tilney mistook the blush for confusion at recognizing Tom Everson's handwriting on the envelope he had given her, and pursed up his lips in a soft whistle of surprise at the little romance upon which he believed himself to have stumbled.

She took him to where Jim was lying in the sunshiny porch, and stood listening whilst the two men talked on business matters; but she did not attempt

to open and read the letter which was held in her hand, although she was alternately flushing and paling with excitement.

"What's that you've got, Maudie, not a letter from Basil surely?" Jim asked, catching sight of the envelope.

"No, no, it's not from Basil," she answered hurriedly, and then darted into the house to read it in private, a procedure which abundantly verified the captain's former suspicions.

Five minutes later she came back again, her face ghastly white, and with a startled look in her eyes.

"Jim, I must go to Victoria to-morrow, for—for Basil's sake," she faltered, putting the letter which she had received from Tom Everson into her brother's hands.

A smothered groan burst from poor Jim at his own impotence to accompany her, as he read what Tom Everson had written.

"You can't go alone to a place like Victoria," he said, looking up at her with something very like despair in his eyes.

It was on her tongue to assert that she was quite able to take care of herself, and would as soon go to Victoria alone as in the care of Jim, but remembering that the voyage would have to be made in company with Captain Tilney, she said instead, "Perhaps Mrs. Neal would go with me if I asked her."

"Ah! that she would, and none better. She will be

glad to see the town again, I dare say, and she is a rare one at taking care of folks," Jim answered, drawing a long breath of relief, and smiling at the remembrance of the extremely good nursing which Mrs. Neal had lavished upon him.

"Is that Charley Neal's wife you are speaking of?" asked Captain Tilney, who had stood quietly observant of the scene between brother and sister.

"Yes, do you know him?" asked Jim, with a gleam of such sharp suspicion in his eyes as made Maudie feel that his delirious fancies were but the outcome of much silent brooding concerning the probable evil wrought to Basil by Mrs. Neal's husband.

"We mostly know Charley Neal in Victoria," replied the captain, with an enigmatical laugh which grated on the ears of both his listeners.

Mrs. Neal and Paul had gone on a berry-gathering expedition that afternoon, and did not return until an hour after the schooner had arrived in charge of the new captain.

Maudie met them before they reached the house, trouble on her face, the open letter in her hand.

"It is about Basil," she said, holding out the folded sheet for Mrs. Neal to take, "and Mr. Everson wants me to go to Victoria as soon as I can. Will you go with me, for I simply cannot bear the man who has come to take Jim's place?"

"Yes, I will go," that lady answered, paling visibly, but she put the letter back unread into Maudie's hand.

"There is no need for me to see it, dear, you can tell me what there is in it."

Maudie looked her surprise; never having received a letter before, she naturally had no sensitiveness about making her correspondence public property, yet felt an instinctive gratitude to Mrs. Neal for returning the letter unread.

"What is it about Basil, Maudie, and why will your going to Victoria help him?" queried Paul in sharp distress.

"A letter has been found in that old man's hut, supposed to have been written by our Basil, in which he threatens Preece Morgan. But Mr. Everson has seen the letter, and he is sure Basil never wrote it, because there are so few mistakes, and everyone knows Basil could hardly spell at all," replied Maudie.

"That he could not," asserted Paul with a chuckle. "But how will your going help him, Maudie? Won't the police think you are denying it to be his writing in order to screen him?"

"I shall take some of those lists of stores he used to make out when he was at home, and that should be a convincing proof of his having no great scholarship. But now I am going to see what fish we can ship to-morrow, for there is no sense in going to market without anything to sell. We have a number of otter-skins ready, and a good lot of herring and halibut; then if the boats are out all night we may get a good take of fresh fish, and be ready to start

with the noon tide," she said, turning to go by a short cut down to the curing-sheds.

"But, Maudie, you haven't told us what the new man is like, and whether Jim is going to keep him on," cried Paul, seizing her by the arm as she was hurrying away.

"He is too unpleasant to describe, but Jim has settled for him to stay a month because of the deep-sea fishing, and his name is Captain Thorpe Tilney."

"That man!" exclaimed Mrs. Neal, with something like consternation on her face.

"Do you know him?" cried Maudie and Paul in a breath; and then the former asked anxiously, "Isn't he a good seaman?"

"I don't know anything about his seamanship, but I certainly do not like the man," Mrs. Neal said emphatically.

"Nor I, so we are agreed on that point," rejoined Maudie, starting off down the hill at a run, whilst Mrs. Neal and Paul followed at a slower pace with their heavy baskets of berries.

"I wish Basil had never gone away, there has seemed no end of trouble ever since," the boy said ruefully; then added in a brighter tone, "But I am glad you came, anyhow."

"That is very nice of you," she answered with a fleeting smile. "Still, things have been neither easy nor rosy in prospect since my coming."

"Do you mean about Maudie?" he asked, thinking

she alluded to the girl's aggressive attitude at the first, and the domestic friction which had ensued in consequence.

"Oh no! Maudie was difficult at first, but that was only because she was taken unawares and did not understand. Just think how kind and unselfish she has been since Mr. Belloc's accident! I was thinking of my own private and particular affairs."

Paul nodded comprehension, and looked his sympathy, then he said with a quaint air of wisdom as he changed his basket to the other hand to ease the strain: "Our Maudie is uncommonly like an oyster, there is such a hard shell to her, but when you get that open there is good inside."

Mrs. Neal laughed. "You might carry the simile farther, and say there is a pearl of great value to be found within by whoever gets the shell open; for I suspect that Maudie will develop into a very noble woman, if she only gets the right sort of training."

"Then I am sure I hope she will get it," said Paul, with so much fervour that Mrs. Neal laughed again, although she was feeling very far from light-hearted just then.

CHAPTER XIII

BEWILDERMENT

IT was what Maudie called a scratch lot of fish with which the schooner sailed next day, but, considering the very short notice they had had, it was really a very creditable lading which had been put on board and stowed away by Paul and Captain Tilney.

Maudie had spent most of the night in her boat, going from point to point of the Inlet where the Indians were fishing. The Tyke and Katchewan went up river at dawn to take their chance of spearing salmon, and returned three hours later with a take which would have driven the aristocratic anglers on Scottish rivers almost mad with envy.

If she had dared, Maudie would have had the stream netted again, but that was never done oftener than once in three weeks, because of the danger there was of making the salmon shy, they being in possession of keener powers of perception than is accredited to most fish.

But the take was, in proportion, much larger than might have been expected from three hours' work of a man and boy, and Maudie was jubilant when she saw it.

Her delight over the abundance and the size of the salmon was a little dashed, however, when, on going into the house to say good-bye to Jim, Mrs. Neal met her, and, drawing her by gentle force into her bed-room, asked her anxiously, "Maudie, have you no better frock than that to wear when you are in Victoria?"

An expression of almost ludicrous dismay came into the girl's face as she looked down at her ragged jersey and soiled red-blanket skirt.

"I had not thought about clothes. I always have a new jersey and a new skirt when the winter sets in, and they mostly last the year through."

"But haven't you anything else, dear,—no other sort of skirt or blouse?" Mrs. Neal asked, with a little gasp of amazement to think that a girl could be found so indifferent to the fascinations of frocks as to possess only one garment to cover her, unless, indeed, she were absolutely penniless, which Maudie was not.

"I have some white frocks, and a blue one that father bought me before he died, but they are too small for me now, and all in rags too," she added, with cheerful candour.

Mrs. Neal smothered a groan. Her own wardrobe was poor and scanty, but at least it was suitable and neat, and she was rapidly reviewing its possibilities, in order to see whether upon a pinch it might not furnish Maudie with apparel more suitable for her visit to the city.

"You must wear that blue serge skirt of mine; it will be too short for you, but not so short as that one," she said, pointing a disapproving finger at the red-blanket garment which swung well above Maudie's slender ankles.

"I like my skirts short, then they don't get in the way," replied the young lady, with an impatient kick at imaginary draperies.

"For the Inlet, yes; but when you go to the city you must do as the city does. And you must have my white flannel blouse too, Maudie. I only hope it will be big enough, for you are some sizes larger than I am;" and Mrs. Neal dived hastily into her own room, returning a moment later with the articles in question, in which she proceeded to array the girl without delay.

"Oh, dear, I shall feel dressed up and queer! But oh, I say, don't I look pretty!" she cried, turning from her little cracked looking-glass to read the confirmation of her naïve exclamation in Mrs. Neal's eyes.

"Has it never occurred to you before that you are very good to look at, Maudie?" asked that lady curiously; for although Maudie was vain enough over her prowess in fishing, and much given to boasting about her feats of angling, Mrs. Neal had never noticed any sign of consciousness of her really remarkable beauty.

"I have never thought about it," she answered simply, standing with her head a little on one side

and surveying with a critical air her reflection in the glass. "But if I stand staring at myself much longer we shall lose the tide, and that will never do."

Jim opened his eyes with amazement at the sight of Maudie transformed, and was loud in his expressions of admiration concerning the change. It gave him a new idea too, and when her back was turned he slipped a roll of notes into the hand of Mrs. Neal, with an injunction that it should be spent on clothes for Maudie.

"What a pretty place this is!" Maudie exclaimed half an hour later, as she stood on deck by the side of Mrs. Neal, while the schooner slid slowly down the Inlet towards the open water beyond.

But Mrs. Neal did not reply, and, turning sharply, Maudie saw to her amazement that she was crying.

"Why, what is the matter — are you ill?" she asked blankly.

"No, no, I am only silly, that is all. But it does wring my heart so to part from little Ron!" Mrs. Neal said, gulping down her unruly emotion in the folds of her pocket-handkerchief.

"But I thought you didn't want to bring him?"

"Nor did I. Travelling by water always seems to make him poorly, and Hooee is so devoted to him that I had no hesitation in trusting him to her care. But all the same, it is a wrench to come away and leave him behind."

"Is that why you told Hooee to take him to see the

goats feeding, just before the schooner slipped her moorings?" asked Maudie, with the air of a person seeking information.

"Yes. There is a lot of latent cowardice in my composition, I am afraid, for I felt that I was not brave enough to sail away leaving him in sight on the shore," Mrs. Neal answered with an unsteady laugh, which quickly changed to a sob.

"You poor little thing!" exclaimed Maudie, slipping an arm round her waist and giving her a loving hug.

It was wonderful how friendly the two had become since the accident at the salmon-spearing. All the prejudice and ill-will had died out of Maudie's heart when she realized what a brave, strong helper Mrs. Neal was in times of disaster, and since then it had been her endeavour to make up so far as she could for her disagreeable behaviour at the first.

Then it was easy to see that Jim owed his rapid recovery—perhaps even his life—to Mrs. Neal's surgical skill and good nursing, and one must be a curmudgeon indeed not to look on benefits like these with affectionate gratitude.

The ocean was in an unkindly mood that day, rolling and rocking the schooner in such stormy disdain that Mrs. Neal, never a good sailor, was speedily rendered *hors de combat*, and even Maudie, who had never suffered from sea-sickness in her life, found some difficulty in keeping her feet on the steep slope of the deck.

There were gray seas and green seas, long foam-crested waves, and ever-changing hills and valleys of water, but the schooner dipped and bowed and curtsied her way steadily ahead, for Captain Tilney, whatever other virtue he might lack, had certainly the gift of seamanship, and believed in making a straight course however difficult and unpleasant it might be.

Mrs. Neal felt very weak and washed out when, on the afternoon of the next day, they landed at Victoria, and made their way to Mr. Gibson's office.

Tom Everson, who had been on the look-out for them, met them as they were endeavouring to make their way through the crowding and bustle of the busy docks.

"I am very glad you have come, and that Mrs. Neal has come to take care of you," he said as he greeted Maudie, and marvelled in masculine uncertainty over the change in her appearance, although he had not the slightest idea where the difference began and ended.

"It is I who have had to take care of Mrs. Neal, for she has been desperately ill all the way," Maudie answered with a laugh; then her manner changed suddenly, and she asked in breathless anxiety, "Will my coming clear Basil, do you think?"

"I hope so, in part at any rate. You see, so much depends upon your ability to disprove the belief that he wrote that damaging letter. But although the warrant is out, I have little fear of his being arrested,

if he keeps away from Victoria, that is. For it is a far cry to Alaska, and not a nice country for man-hunting either, by all that I can hear. Then, too, you must understand it is not murder, for the doctor says Preece Morgan need not have died of the mauling, but for the paralytic seizure induced by the fright and excitement," Tom Everson said, with an honest desire to allay her anxiety.

But she only shook her head, as if repudiating his suggestion that the seizure and not the wounding was to blame for Preece Morgan's decease. And then she said with quivering lips, "If I knew that Basil had really done such a dreadful thing, I think I would rather he should be punished than go free; but I cannot believe he would hurt anyone, he was always so gentle and kind, more so than Jim even, who is apt to be hasty and hard when he is roused."

Tom Everson nodded but made no reply, turning instead to give his arm to Mrs. Neal, who looked so white and frail that he was afraid she would sink in a swoon in the street.

Mr. Gibson was not in when they reached his office, so, leaving a message for him, Tom Everson took them straight on to the police-station, where the letter was to be seen.

The superintendent, who had only the day before returned from Alberni, received Mrs. Neal with the warmth of an old acquaintance, but his greeting of Maudie was coldly severe, she being the sister of a

man under suspicion, and therefore in some indefinable fashion implicated in the supposed wrong-doing, according to the peculiar reasoning of the emissary of the law.

But this kind of treatment had the effect of sending Maudie's head up with a jerk, and causing her tall, slight figure to fairly bristle with aggressive defiance.

She could not keep her hands from trembling however, when with icy politeness the superintendent placed before her the letter she had come so far to see.

A mist swam before her eyes, too, and a chill horror filled her heart, so that for a whole minute she sat staring at the paper, unable to gather its sense or even discern its characters.

Tom Everson, looking at her, experienced a sudden fear lest she was going to declare after all that she could not deny that the letter was in the handwriting of Basil.

Then she drew a long breath of relief, and said steadily, "This is not Basil's writing, I am positive; it is so neat and even, quite beautiful work, as regular as printing. Look, Mrs. Neal!"

That lady, who was sitting at a little distance, rose then, and came to glance at the paper in Maudie's hand.

But no sooner had her gaze rested upon it, than, to the bewilderment of them all, she flung up her hands with a shrill little cry of despair, and dropped in a dead faint upon the floor.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REASON OF THE SWOON

IT was fortunate, in the circumstances, that Tom Everson had begged the hospitality of Mrs. Gibson for Maudie when he sent that letter to the Inlet asking her to come to Victoria, for it was easy to stretch this favour in order to make it include Mrs. Neal also.

The swoon into which she had fallen on catching sight of the letter was of a very obstinate character, and, growing frightened at its duration, the police superintendent hastily summoned the divisional surgeon to the lady's assistance.

Maudie meanwhile hung over her friend in dismay and helpless bewilderment, never doubting but what Mrs. Neal was already dead, or at least dying.

But when the doctor arrived matters speedily took on a different complexion, for that gentleman jerked open the two windows of the very stuffy little room, propped open the door, and brought Mrs. Neal back to consciousness in less time than it takes to talk about it.

She opened her eyes with a long shuddering sigh, struggling to a sitting posture with a wild look of terror in her face.

But the doctor laid her back on the pillow, which they had put under her head as she lay on the floor, telling her to keep quiet for a little while until she felt better.

"I am better, thank you," she said in a weak voice, panting as if she had been running. "Did I faint?"

"It looks like it, certainly," rejoined the doctor with a touch of grimness. "And no one had the sense to open a door or window to give you a breath of fresh air," he went on, sweeping his hand out with a gesture which included Tom Everson and the superintendent, but looking only at Maudie, as if he considered that the principal blame lay with her.

She crimsoned under the reproach of his gaze, and said meekly, "I have never seen anyone faint before, that is why I did not know what to do."

"Happy girl! And you have never fainted yourself, I'll be bound," he said, with an appreciative glance at the healthful red and white of her complexion.

"No, indeed!" she exclaimed with a shiver, for to her fainting seemed almost as dreadful as dying itself.

The doctor declared that Mrs. Neal must not walk another step that day, and Tom Everson departed in search of some sort of carriage, in which to convey her to Mr. Gibson's residence, which was in the suburbs at some distance from the docks.

Whilst he was gone, and the doctor was talking to

Mrs. Neal, Maudie found a minute in which to speak privately to the superintendent.

"Will you still insist on having my brother arrested now that it is proved he did not write that letter?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, certainly, if only to give him a chance of proving his *alibi* on that night when the man Preece Morgan was hurt," the officer answered briskly, looking as if he thought it rather a good thing than otherwise for a man to be arrested on suspicion of being concerned in a very grave misdemeanour.

Maudie sighed and turned back to Mrs. Neal. It was plainly of no use expecting anything more of the superintendent, and deep down in her heart was the feeling that if Basil had done wrong he ought to pay the penalty of his fault.

"The letter, Maudie, get it for me again just for a moment if you can," pleaded Mrs. Neal, with such an imploring look in her eyes that Maudie obeyed her without hesitation, although she would rather have done almost anything than ask a favour of the superintendent.

"Before we go, can I see that letter again for just one moment?" she asked, looking straight into his face with brilliant defiant eyes.

The superintendent hesitated. She looked daring enough to destroy the paper before his eyes, and it was important evidence in a very difficult and obscure case."

"You need not be afraid, I shall not hurt it," she said, with ringing scorn in her tone, guessing the thought that was in his heart; and, ashamed of himself because of his implied doubt of her good faith, he opened his desk and put the letter into her hands again.

She did not flutter and tremble now as when she had looked at it before. Basil had not written it, of that she was positive, so there was no more reason for fear in her heart than if the letter had been an ordinary bit of printed paper.

"It is plainly a fraud, is it not?" she asked, turning to Mrs. Neal, and thus giving that lady an opportunity of seeing it, although she was desperately afraid of another swoon, and was only reassured by the presence of the doctor close at hand.

The letter was brief and to the point. Mrs. Neal caught her breath as she took it, but she read it straight through before giving it back to Maudie again.

"To Mr. Preece Morgan,

"Sir,

"I am writing to ask once again if you will lend me at a fair rate of interest the two hundred dollars you won from me last night.

"You know it was my entire capital, and its loss makes a desperate man of me. If you refuse to do what I ask, I may find means to make you.

"BASIL BELLOC."

As a piece of evidence it was damaging exceedingly, or would have been if Basil had really written it; but that had been denied not merely by Tom Everson and Maudie, but by the mute testimony of Basil himself, as contained in the badly-written, worse-spelled note-books which Maudie had brought from the Inlet.

The superintendent looked at Mrs. Neal a little curiously as she bent over the letter, but he made no remark concerning it, and just then Tom Everson arrived with a little open carriage he had secured, in which to drive that lady and Maudie to Mr. Gibson's house.

The drive was such a novelty to Maudie, and their reception by Mrs. Gibson so delightfully warm and hospitable, that she forgot everything disagreeable straightaway, and felt as if she had come to Victoria on a pleasure-trip pure and simple.

But that night when she was fast asleep by the side of Mrs. Neal, in the luxurious guest-chamber at Mr. Gibson's suburban abode, she was suddenly roused from her slumber with a start, by the sound of bitter sobbing.

"Oh, you poor dear little woman, are you crying for your baby still?" she asked sleepily, thrusting out her hand to pat her companion on the shoulder in consoling-wise.

"No, no, I was not crying for Ron; I had even forgotten him. for the first time in his life, poor little

laddie!" she answered, with another burst of sobbing, which had the effect of thoroughly arousing Maudie, making her as wide awake as if she had never been to sleep at all.

"Then what is the matter? And oh, I say, whatever shall I do if you faint again, for I can't rouse the house in the middle of the night, and I am quite sure that I can't fetch you round by myself?" she cried, jumping from the bed and groping her way in the dark to the window, in order to ensure Mrs. Neal a plentiful supply of fresh air. Her next movement would doubtless have been for the water-jug, had not Mrs. Neal declared herself in no immediate, or even prospective, danger of swooning.

"But, Maudie, I am the most wretched woman in the whole wide world to-night!" she panted, with so much despair in manner and tone that Maudie was frightened by its misery.

"Is it anything that I have done, or because I used to be so horrid to you?" she asked, for her conscience had not ceased to prick her regarding that past behaviour of hers, so heartily repented of since better feelings had dominated her heart.

"No, no! How could it be, for you have been the dearest, kindest child to me, ever since you began to realize that I wanted to be your friend, and not merely a troublesome interloper? But I have been lying here to-night, and trying to gain courage to tell you something which it wrings my heart to utter."

"Don't tell it then, for there is no sense in unnecessary suffering," replied the practical Maudie.

"I must, even though it may mean a loss of home and friends to me, for when you know, I am afraid you will not let me go back to the Inlet."

"Just won't I, though! Don't be worrying yourself on that score, only do please tell me quickly, because I do hate being kept on fish-hooks;" and Maudie gave an impatient wriggle, as if already she found the barbs piercing her skin.

"That night when Mr. Belloc was so delirious from the shock of his wound, he kept on declaring that my husband was at the root of this evil concerning Basil, do you remember, Maudie?"

"Yes, and how I scoffed at you for paying heed to the wanderings of a madman. But I was sorry for you all the same, it must have been so awful for you to bear."

Mrs. Neal covered her face with her hands, and for a moment was silent, struggling with some emotion which seemed too painful to be borne; then she said in a quick, breathless tone, as if fearful that her courage would out before she had done: "It was not altogether the raving of a madman, Maudie, but some mysterious prevision of the truth, which had been given to your brother in his sickness. Can you guess why I fainted to-day?"

"That hot walk from the docks, the horrid stuffiness of the room at the police-place, and your weak

state from having been so ill on the schooner," rejoined Maudie briskly, ticking the items off on her fingers with much the same air as if she were checking invoices.

"It was nothing of the kind. I swooned from shock pure and simple, when I saw that the handwriting of that letter was my husband's."

Maudie gave a violent start, but her voice was curiously steady and quiet as she asked, "Are you quite sure?"

"Quite. Remember, it was a peculiarly firm and characteristic hand; 'beautiful writing, like print', you called it. I think my heart broke in that moment," Mrs. Neal said; then she covered her face and was silent from sheer misery.

And Maudie was silent too.

CHAPTER XV

A RIGHTEOUS DETERMINATION

JIM and Paul found the days pass in a dead level of monotony during the absence of Maudie and Mrs. Neal; the house wore its former appearance of desolation and neglect—though in a modified degree—and life generally dropped into dun-coloured dreariness.

Jim was so much better that he could potter about the curing-sheds, overseeing the women at their work, and he had been for one or two turns about the Inlet in a canoe before the day the schooner was expected home.

He was growing keenly anxious to be in full work again, and was making many plans for utilizing to the utmost the services of Captain Tilney, by sending the schooner on weekly trips to the city, instead of, as heretofore, making the journeys once in every month.

Paul had dropped back into his old habits of housekeeping, and found so much employment that he had no time at all for making plans, except such as were connected with each day's requirements, which was not looking very far ahead.

One reason for his activity was his desire that

little Ron should not be neglected, or have to miss any care or attention during his mother's absence. So Hooee was told off to nurse's duty for every hour in the twenty-four, and her charge had decidedly more spoiling than was good for him.

The schooner came in with the night tide, a daring thing to do, seeing that the night was cloudy, and the new moon too much of a weakling to be very useful. But then Captain Tilney was rather fond of doing daring things, especially when the boats he commanded were the property of other people.

In this case no mishap occurred, however; only the travellers returned to find no welcome awaiting them, for everyone on the Inlet was in bed and asleep.

It did not take long to arouse them, and Paul was still blinking sleepily as he lighted the lamp in the common room, after a toilet of the briefest, when Maudie entered through the porch, half-leading, half-carrying Mrs. Neal, who tottered rather than walked.

"A miserable shame it is that we should all be sleeping like dogs when you come back, but as you missed the noon tide we didn't expect you in until the morning," explained Paul in apologetic greeting.

"Where is Jim?" Maudie asked anxiously, as she supported Mrs. Neal as far as the settle, and then applied herself with great energy to the task of building up the fire.

"He is just coming, only he isn't quite as nimble

as I am, though he is ever so much better," Paul said, staring from Mrs. Neal to Maudie, and from her back to Mrs. Neal again, seeing plainly that something was very wrong indeed, yet not venturing to ask for the ill-tidings, which might be even worse than his most gloomy apprehension.

Mrs. Neal crouched in a huddled heap on the settle, and Maudie worked at the fire with such desperate energy that the pine boughs were flaring all up the big chimney, when the door of Jim's room opened, and he came limping out in all haste to give them greeting.

But the first glance was enough, and he paused on the threshold, crying out sharply, "Is it the lad, Maudie? Have they found Basil and proved him guilty?"

"No, indeed, and are not likely to. But come here, Jim, and let us get matters settled before Captain Tilney comes in. I asked him to wait half an hour, just so that we might have a chance to talk things over alone, though it nearly choked me to ask a favour at his hands, I do dislike him so much," she said, with angry impatience in her tone.

"If it isn't Basil, then it is a new trouble," Jim said, limping forward to stand leaning against one of the pillars of the great square fireplace, while the leaping flames flung fitful lights and shadows over his face. "What is it, Maudie? Have you been quarrelling with Mrs. Neal?"

"She has been too ill and miserable for anything of that sort, or there is no saying what I might have done," rejoined Maudie, with a touch of her old defiant manner, as she stood confronting her brother.

He shook his head doubtfully as if not understanding her meaning; then, turning to Paul, he asked him to shut the outer door of the porch, which had been left open.

"Tell him, Maudie, tell him straight out and get it over. He may want the door open then, to thrust me out!" cried Mrs. Neal in a tone of such bitter pain that Jim instinctively made a movement towards her, which, however, she repelled with a gesture of entreaty, that he should suspend judgment until the whole story had been laid before him.

"The letter was not of Basil's writing, as Mr. Everson had said," began Maudie, yet with a quiver in her tone, which showed how little to her mind was the task she had set herself, "and when Mrs. Neal saw the handwriting, she recognized it at once."

"Ah! she did, did she?" broke from Jim, his words followed by a deep indrawn breath.

"She says it was written by her husband," jerked out Maudie with appalling abruptness, and then she drew a step nearer to Mrs. Neal, standing on the defensive, as if to guard her from some outbreak of wrath from Jim.

But none came. He only stood rigid and fixed

as if the news had petrified him, whilst Paul crept closer to the settle, as though to give Mrs. Neal the comfort of his silent sympathy in the bitter trouble which had come to her.

"And now comes the question of what is to be done," went on Maudie, speaking hurriedly, as if to get the unpleasant task over. "Mrs. Neal wanted to stay in the city and have Ron sent to her there the next time the schooner went the trip. But I insisted on her coming back. I told her that if there was no other way I would carry her on board by sheer force—because she had no money to pay for lodgings, and no friends to stay with. If you feel bad about it, and don't like to have her here because her husband is mixed up in that business of Basil's, then you must say so, and send her away if you think fit." Here Maudie's manner became so defiantly aggressive that Paul drew farther away, as if through fear lest she should feel it incumbent on her to fiercely attack somebody.

"What do you take me for?" burst out Jim then. "Do you think I'm the sort of man to turn a woman and a child adrift on the scanty mercy of a cold selfish world, just because someone belonging to them has acted low down? I thought that you at least, Maudie, would have had a better opinion of me." And there was so much sorrowful indignation in his tone, that his sister hastened to cry out:

"I never should have dreamed of such a thing,

Jim, if it had not been that you were so set against Mr. Neal when you were off your head. It made me think that when you heard about the letter you would be so angry and hurt, for Basil's sake, that you would not like Mrs. Neal to stay here any longer."

"Humph!" ejaculated Jim. "That shows how very little grip a girl will get of things, even when she's been living alongside of them all her life. Mrs. Neal, I'm proud and happy to see you back at the Inlet again, and I hope you'll make it convenient and pleasant to stay on here with your little lad, until such time as your husband finds himself able to come for you."

There was no describing the shine of Jim's eyes, or the illumination of pity and benevolence which made radiant the face he turned upon the cowering, shrinking little woman on the settle, who was so overcome by this exhibition of great-heartedness, that she could do nothing but put her trembling hand in honest Jim's work-roughened palm, and thank him in a silence more eloquent than words.

"Well, that is settled, and now we can see about going to bed," said Maudie, subsiding from her fine defensive pose, and becoming severely practical, according to her wont, when there was any question of strained emotions to the fore.

"Now Paul and I will go down to the landing to see that Captain Tilney has got all straight on the

schooner; for, except Katchewan, the Indians can't stand overmuch in the way of temptation, neither man nor woman," rejoined Jim, with something of his old briskness of manner, as he limped slowly towards the door, followed by Paul.

But Mrs. Neal crept away to find her sleeping child, and then to fall on her knees and beseech heaven's blessing on her benefactor, since but for Jim Belloc's Christian charity no homeless wanderer on the wide earth had been more desolate than she.

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT ON THE BANKS

THE weeks slipped on in an even flow after the return of Maudie and Mrs. Neal from Victoria, the only items to break the quiet routine of daily life being a brief but unexpected visit from Tom Everson, who came overland from Cowichan, and the dismissal and departure of Captain Tilney.

The gallant captain had thought it a good opportunity to line his own pockets, whilst presumably busy in attending to his employer's interests, the result being that at the end of the term of their agreement Jim found himself decidedly the loser by the transaction, although he could not put his finger on the precise spot where the leakage had occurred. Thorpe Tilney, on the other hand, had found the engagement so exceedingly profitable, that he would gladly have signed on for another month had Jim shown himself agreeable to the bargain.

After his departure matters slipped back into pretty much their old order, only with a difference. As before, Jim and his Indian crew took the schooner to and fro between the Inlet and the city, conveying the cured fish and the skins of seals and sea-otters to

market, bringing back such stores as were needful for use in the home and the business, while Maudie spent laborious days fishing from the Inlet or the river emptying into it, attending to her traps, and keeping a keen surveillance over all details connected with the work of catching and curing the finny riches of the deep.

The difference lay in the fact that, whereas in the past her days had been replete with egotistical content in herself and her surroundings, Maudie had suddenly become filled with new aspirations and ambitions, which threatened to overthrow all previous ideals and work an entire revolution in her outlook.

The change had sprung from varying causes, the main factors being the greater comfort and refinement of the home-life since the advent of Mrs. Neal; the glimpse into new scenes consequent on her brief visit to the city; and last, but by no means least, a secret sensation which made her blush hotly even to think of, and to which she would not give a name, even in her private cogitations when fishing solitarily upon the Inlet.

Under the effect of these combined influences Maudie yearned to be that creature whom, in her youthful hot-headedness, she had so scornfully despised—a womanly woman, a graceful, gentle creature, as wise as Solomon on all matters connected with domestic comfort and the making and wearing of dainty array.

But it was the irony of fate that tied her harder

and faster to her old strenuous mode of living than ever before. When she might have thrown aside fish and fishing, she would not; now that she most earnestly desired to betake herself to a more strictly feminine form of occupation, she could not.

The reason was not far to seek. Jim could not do without her help now, with Basil away, and no one else except her upon whom to depute the responsibility of looking after things during his frequent and necessary absences.

If Paul had been an ordinary boy he might have taken a share in Maudie's amphibious working life, but his loathing of the sea and all connected with it was so strong that no one who knew him ever dreamed of forcing him to adventure himself upon the water, and since a person must love his work to succeed in it, there would have been but scanty prospect of his ever doing even passably well at it.

So Maudie kept her rebellion against fate hidden away in her inmost heart, and toiled bravely to do her duty in all sorts of weathers, shrinking from nothing that was hard or unpleasant or distasteful, but striving to be as thorough as in the days when work was pleasure and pleasure was work.

That autumn proved to be a very wet and windy one. Even before September was out it was raining every day, whilst a tempest about once in every forty-eight hours was more the rule than the exception.

But this bad weather, instead of adding, as it might

reasonably have done, to Maudie's secret dissatisfaction with things in general, proved a welcome distraction, for it gave her no time for chafing and fretting, but kept her attention closely riveted to the task in hand.

A veritable child of the storm she seemed in those days of roaring wind and lashing rain, her clear voice sending out orders through the misty spray, her merry laugh following the command, and making obedience a pleasurable necessity.

Following the storms came still, foggy weather, and then Maudie and Jim attacked the autumn bank-fishing in good earnest.

Deep-sea fishing the Indians of the Inlet called it, but that was merely by way of expressing the difference between that mode of procedure and their ordinary methods of angling on shore.

The banks lay ten or twelve miles from the Inlet, a kind of low, half-submerged islands a little way out from shore, and presenting a terrible menace to the unwary navigator, since at certain stages of the tide they were all but hidden from view.

Here, cod, halibut, and many other kinds of fish were to be found of an enormous size, and in such great abundance that, as Maudie said, it quite made one's heart ache to leave so many uncaught.

One day when they were fishing at this place a sudden tempest broke the misty quiet of gray sky and grayer sea. It proved to be not merely one of

the brief storms, over and gone in an hour, to which they had been subjected with such regularity a few weeks before, but a steady, howling blow, which might continue for twenty-four hours or more, keeping them prisoners in their snug anchorage until it was over, for it would be folly akin to madness to venture the schooner out in the open whilst the hurly-burly lasted.

Maudie was sorely disappointed by their enforced detention. She had promised herself a long delightful evening by the big fire in the common room, learning the mysteries of button-hole and cross-stitch, whilst Paul read *David Copperfield* aloud, and Jim smoked in dreamy, absorbed contentment, stretched out on the oak settle.

That picture of happy leisure after toil was in such vivid contrast to the reality which had to be endured, that the hot tears scorched Maudie's eyes and mingled with the salt spray on her cheeks.

The cabin of the schooner was a mere cupboard. It was, moreover, so lumbered up with tackle and spare spars and ropes, that she ruefully reflected upon having to take her night's rest seated on one coil of rope, with her head pillowed against another, in the grimy, stuffy little hole which only courtesy dignified by the name of cabin.

It was not the hardship which daunted her, or the exceeding discomfort of the fish-laden schooner, but the loss of privilege she would have to sustain in

missing one of those bright evenings which had come to make such an oasis of pleasure at the end of a dreary, toilsome autumn day.

However, troubles are not mended by being brooded over, and, pulling herself up resolutely, Maudie betook herself to the tiny galley to superintend and augment the Tyke's preparations for supper.

These were of necessity not luxurious. A bag of biscuit had been put aboard before leaving the Inlet in case of detention, and with some broiled fish and boiled tea would serve alike for supper, breakfast, and dinner until the supply was exhausted.

The storm had risen to such magnitude by the time supper was over, that it seemed doubtful whether even their snug anchorage would give them a safe shelter for the night; and Jim was in sore perplexity as to the wisdom of cutting his cable and taking his chance of the open sea, for, like all true mariners, he dreaded the vicinity of land when storms were to the fore.

But night dropped so suddenly that there was speedily no question of cutting the cable and drifting; they could only pray that it might not break before daylight came once more.

In all her life of outdoor peril and adventure Maudie had never seen such a storm before. She crouched on deck, wrapped in an old watchman's cloak, gazing in terrified awe upon the wall of midnight blackness, flecked here and there with clouds

of white spray, as revealed in the dim light of the schooner's lantern.

"Shall we weather it, Jim?" she asked, when a movement behind her made her feel that her brother was near, even though she could not see him in the black dark, nor hear him because of the howling thunder of the wind.

As it was, she had to shout her question thrice before he could understand its import, and then he put his lips to her ear to answer, "God only knows whether the cable will hold. If it parts, nothing but a miracle can save us!"

A catching, choking sob gripped Maudie's throat, for she was young, healthy, and strong, and to die like this was too terrible even to think of. Then again with vivid contrasting power came the vision of that pleasant home-like room at the house on the Inlet, the lamp-light and fire-light, the peace and security of it all. She saw the faces of Mrs. Neal and Paul, heard the babbling laughter of little Ron, whilst the shadowy figure of Hooee mingled with the other shadows, as she moved about in pursuit of her nursling.

Then suddenly across the black wall of night came the blue flare of a rocket, and at the same time Jim's hand gripped her shoulder.

"The wind is lessening a bit, and the cable has held so long I'm hoping we'll pull through after all."

But Maudie did not heed his words, for another

rocket had flared and spent itself before her eyes, and by its sign she knew that some poor souls existed near at hand, in straits more critical even than theirs.

"Jim, do you see it?" she cried, as another flare showed and died away, and the wall of night stood blacker than before.

"Ah! May the good Lord preserve them, they are driving straight on shore!" cried Jim, his voice hoarse with horror, as some lessening in the wall of blackness showed him dimly through the storm-wrack the hull of the vessel driving to her doom.

"Can't we help them?" cried Maudie, struggling to her feet and clinging to Jim for support.

"We can't help ourselves, much less anyone else. Where they are now, poor souls, we may be ten minutes later!" he rejoined bitterly, and then they stood clinging to each other and gazing almost with suspended breath, whilst the vessel drove on and struck.

Maudie could bear it no longer then, but dropped on the deck again, covering her face with her hands, and crying stormily at the thought of those poor wretches yonder driving to their doom, then being lashed and dashed by waves until the life was finally beaten out of them by the sport of the cruel sea.

But Jim had sprung forward and was shouting orders at the top of his voice, himself assisting too the work of carrying them out, for his Indians, ex-

cepting Katchewan and the Tyke, were too limp and inert with terror to do more than cling together in a huddled group for safety.

"Light every lantern we've got, and hang 'em up where they'll show, then we'll make a flare of fish-oil forward!" yelled Jim, scurrying about in feverish activity to get his vessel illuminated to the best of his ability.

"What are you doing?" demanded Maudie, hearing the shouts, and lifting her head to discover their cause.

"The only thing in my power to help those poor wretches yonder. If they see our lights they may manage to drift toward us, or at any rate they won't be so lonely in their death, for no little boat could live in such a sea, saving by a miracle," Jim answered, and then was away again, making desperate efforts to stir his Indians into activity.

The gale was lessening fast, and the blackest of the gloom was lifting too, for somewhere behind the masses of driving billowy clouds a waning moon was rising, to permeate the black night with a light so feeble that it was little more than lesser gloom.

"What was that?" cried Maudie sharply, as she made out a dim object floating on the top of a white-crested wave.

But it was only momentarily visible, and then it had sunk from their view into a deep valley of sliding water.

"It's a man, and him's lashed to a spar!" yelled the Tyke, dancing round on his toes, nearly frantic with excitement.

"Stand by with a rope here, you Katchewan!" called Jim, who had flung aside his oil-skin coat and kicked off his big sea-boots; then, before Maudie realized his intention, he had sprung over the side right into the seething, surging waters to the help of the man, who was even now rising to the top of the next big wave.

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAN FROM JUNEAU

WHEN Jim slid down out of sight in those boiling, seething waters, it was all that Maudie could do in the panic of the moment to keep from flinging herself after him. But he had a rope round his waist, and Katchewan the dependable was at the other end of it, so she set her teeth hard, and, gripping the rail tightly with both hands to avoid being blown overboard, waited breathlessly the issue of her brother's heroism.

"There he is! there he is! and he has got hold of the poor fellow too!" cried Maudie, as Jim reappeared clutching the man, who was lashed to a spar. "Oh, Katchewan, be careful, pray be careful!"

There were plenty of willing dusky hands to haul at the rope, yet nothing could satisfy Maudie but to drag at it with all her might herself, and she was trembling from exertion as well as excitement, when at length Jim and his companion were landed on the deck.

Half-drowned they were, and the man on whose behalf Jim Belloc had ventured his life was unconscious from the buffeting of the turbulent sea.

They carried the poor fellow down to the shelter of the cabin, and did their best to bring back the life to his sorely battered body. One leg was broken, whilst his right hand and arm were bruised and gashed in a terrible manner—even his face had not escaped injury.

But he was alive, and after a time came back to consciousness, and the torture of his wounded limbs.

They did their best for him, but it was of necessity a very poor best, since their only available surgeon was Katchewan, and of remedies and appliances they had none.

By the time morning broke, it was plain to Jim that the man must die, though Maudie talked hopefully of what Mrs. Neal's nursing might do for him, if only they could keep life in him until the Inlet should be reached once more.

There might have been more hope for the poor fellow if he had not been so acutely conscious of his desperate condition; as it was, he suffered such agonies of dread and apprehension as served to accelerate the inevitable issue.

Maudie came out in a new character then, administering consolation to the dying man, whilst Jim gazed at her in silent amazement, wondering where she had learned so much of heavenly wisdom, since he himself had so little of the lore.

"It is all very well for a bit of a girl like you to smooth your dying with a prayer, but when it is a

man like me steeped in wrong-living and wickedness matters are different," said the stranger, with feeble impatience.

"Mrs. Neal says that if the sacrifice of Christ can avail to save the least of sinners, it can save the greatest too. 'For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God'," quoted Maudie reverently, thereby revealing to her brother who had been her instructor in the things pertaining to religion.

"Mrs. Neal, did you say? what Neal?" asked the suffering stranger, coming out of his self-absorption to display a momentary interest in the name, and fixing the gaze of his dark fierce eyes upon Maudie.

"She is a Mrs. Charles Neal, and her husband has gone to the Klondyke," replied the girl, her heart beating quicker as she bent over the injured man, whose bed was the coils of rope which she had arranged to form her own couch. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, but he hasn't gone to the Klondyke; isn't likely to go either, seeing that he is making money hand over hand where he is. Oh yes, I know him! they call him cheerful Charley in Dyea, and he and his partner, Basil Belloc, are two of the most popular fellows in the place."

"Basil!" cried Maudie. "Why, that is my brother. Jim, Jim, do you hear? Basil is in Dyea, and this man has seen him!"

Jim's hands shook, and his voice was quivering and

unsteady as he too bent over the sufferer and asked, "Are you sure, mate, that Basil Belloc and Charley Neal were partners?"

"Am I sure that I have got eyes and can see with 'em?" demanded the stranger with fretful impatience, fixing the orbs in question upon Jim's anxious face. "Why, anybody going in or getting out of Dyea can't help knowing their partnership, seeing they've stuck up a board with letters on it as big as your hand—'Belloc & Neal, outfitters and provision dealers'."

"You've come from Dyea straight, I take it?" queried Jim, who had been thrown into a condition of agitated perplexity by this new light on the situation.

"Yes, only our captain would insist on coming outside Vancouver Island, so as to have plenty of searoom, instead of taking the inside channel, and this is what has come of it," groaned the poor fellow: "the ship a wreck, and every one of the three hundred souls aboard sent to Davy Jones's locker as swift as they could go, except me, and I sha'n't be long in following 'em."

"I don't think so, mate," put in Jim quietly. "For if your time has come, at least we can dig you a decent grave, if so be that God Almighty sees fit to let us reach our home again."

"That is good hearing, seeing I never did relish the idea of being food for fishes. But where has the

young woman gone? The things she said about going to heaven and all that were main comforting to hear."

Maudie had slipped away from the little crowded, stuffy cabin in which the dying man lay, and had gone on deck to be alone with her conflicting emotions for a moment, for this unexpected news of Basil had after all been more disconcerting than joyful.

But when Jim called her, she came back at once to do all that in her lay towards soothing the passing of that shrinking soul, trembling on the brink of the unknown.

He died before they reached the Inlet, the last survivor of that ill-fated company of voyagers, for no other person of them all escaped, even for a brief moment, the clutches of the cruel sea.

Jim and Maudie held a short consultation after the death of the unfortunate stranger. It would be necessary to notify the event to the authorities the next time the steamer went to Victoria, but they were surely not called upon to announce in the same breath the whereabouts of Basil.

That at least was Jim's argument, though Maudie adhered obstinately enough to an exactly opposite view of the case, declaring that Basil ought to be forced to come forward and prove his *alibi*, or suffer the consequences of his wrong-doing, if he were in reality implicated in the matter of Preece Morgan's death.

"Surely if we hide a thing like that we become sharers in the sin!" she exclaimed hotly, her cheeks flushing, and her eyes flashing as she turned to face her brother.

Jim shook his head with a sorrowful air. "I couldn't do it, Maudie, no, not if I knew to a dead certainty that he was guilty. Just think of betraying your own brother, one that you have lived with and loved as long as you could remember! More than likely, too, if he did raise his hand against that old man, it was done in sheer self-defence, and with never a thought of hurting him. Poor old Basil!"

Maudie's passion melted then in a flood of bitter tears. And Jim, in his well-meant attempts at consolation, could not even guess at the fierce tumult of mortification and wounded pride raging in her heart. She had always been so proud of their good old name and untarnished reputation, and so happy in the toil by which they earned their bread! but now the pride was humbled to the dust, and the joy was completely obscured by this threat of disgrace and shame which might come to them at the hands of Basil.

"Things will clear up by and by, don't fret so, Maudie; and somehow I can't think Basil is guilty, for it isn't the action of a man with a crime hanging over him to stick up his name in letters as long as your hand, as the poor fellow lying in yonder talked about before the breath left his body," Jim said, with

a backward jerk of his head in the direction of the cabin, where lay the remains of the stranger.

Maudie gulped down a few sobs which threatened to choke her, and let the cool breeze fan her heated cheeks, but she would not discuss the matter any further, and Jim was left in doubt as to her real feeling on the subject.

There was a little plot of ground about half a mile from the house on the Inlet, which was railed in and tended with jealous care, because it contained the graves of the elder Belloc and his two wives. A grave was dug for the stranger in the little enclosure, and there they laid him to rest, with the tall pines to murmur his requiem when the strong winds passed that way.

He had left no name by which they might remember him, yet there was little danger of his being forgotten by Jim or Maudie, for in their minds he must always be associated with the tidings of Basil which he had brought.

Jim started for Victoria on the day following the funeral. It was some three days earlier than he had intended going, but he was anxious to make known the news of the wreck in the proper quarter, and so get the matter off his mind.

The name of the ill-fated vessel he knew to be *The Star of the North*, voyaging from Juneau to San Francisco, with three hundred passengers and heavy shipments of Alaskan gold on board.

"*The Star of the North*, did you say? Why, that was surely old Captain Cotterel's vessel," said Mr. Gibson, the shipping agent. "So he has pegged out! Well, he was a good man, and the world will be the poorer for his loss, for there are none too many of his sort about."

"He should have kept to the inside channel, and then he might have been alive now instead of lying twenty fathoms deep off the Black Rocks," Jim answered sententiously. He had performed the errand which had brought him to the city, and now was impatient to be gone about his other business.

But Mr. Gibson was not disposed to let him go so easily. Jim Belloc was a favourite of his, and the uncertainty concerning Basil did but serve to heighten the kindly agent's interest in the elder brother, on whom the burden of the other's disappearance rested so heavily.

"I promised Mrs. Gibson that I would bring you out to see her the very next time you came to the city, and I daren't disappoint her or I shall never hear the last of it," he said with a genial laugh.

Jim was in no mood for company, and would fain have excused himself, but Mr. Gibson overruled his excuses as fast as he made them, so in the end he had to go, even though he had no clothes with him, saving the rough fisher garb in which he had come to the city, and Mr. Gibson's suburban home was an ultra fine mansion, almost first cousin to a palace.

But the welcome he received from Mrs. Gibson soon served to put him at his ease, and when she began to talk of Maudie, he quickly forgot the difference between himself and his surroundings.

"I was so sorry not to be able to keep your sister on a longer visit, Mr. Belloc, but it was quite impossible to persuade her to stay, and really that poor little Mrs. Neal was not in a fit condition to return to the Inlet without a companion of her own sex."

"No, ma'am, I am quite sure she was not," replied Jim with decision, as he mentally reviewed that scene in his home when Maudie and Mrs. Neal returned by the night tide.

"But now that you are better and able to look after your fisheries yourself, could you not spare your sister to come on a really long visit, say six weeks or two months? The town is quite gay in the winter, you know, and she would be sure to enjoy a peep at the world after her quiet life on the Inlet," the lady went on persuasively. She had taken a great fancy to Maudie, and one of her chief reasons in telling her husband to bring Jim out to enjoy their hospitality was, that it might prove a stepping-stone to her gaining temporary possession of his sister.

"It is very kind of you even to think of such a thing, but—" Jim hesitated about the wording of his objection, flushing a hot brick-dust red under his sunburn. How he would have jumped at such a chance for Maudie a little while ago, yet how he shrank

from it now, through the fear lest in her hot-headed desire for justice and right she should betray the secret of Basil's whereabouts to the police.

Of course the knowledge might leak out any day. Indeed it was strange that it had been kept so long, seeing that Basil himself had plainly been at no pains to cover his trail. But Jim was quite morbidly sensitive on the matter, and reckoned it scarcely less than a crime that one of their own family should be the means of betraying Basil.

"Oh, indeed, I can have no buts, Mr. Belloc! Has it never occurred to you what a really beautiful girl your sister is? And it is ten thousand pities to waste her on the fishy solitudes of your precious Inlet," went on Mrs. Gibson, wrinkling her nose with an expression of distaste, just as if the odour of the despised fish was even then present with her, thereby making Jim even more uncomfortable than his private reflections had caused him to be.

He shifted a little uneasily in his chair, foreseeing that he would eventually have to give way, but determined to make the process of yielding last as long as possible.

"We will talk it over when I get back, and I will bring you an answer next time I come. Of course it goes without saying that Maudie will be wild to accept your kind invitation, but she will want a little time to get some proper clothes ready to come in," he said, stealing a glance at the showy luxuriousness all

about him, and thinking ruefully what a contrast Maudie would present clad in her old red-blanket skirt and well-worn jersey.

"No, no, Mr. Belloc, that is the very biggest mistake you can make. What can your sister know about clothes whilst existing in such barbarous solitudes? You just bring her along on your very next trip, and I will settle the question of what she is to wear," the lady rejoined in her smart brisk way.

But Jim's head went up with a jerk, for he thought Mrs. Gibson was offering to pay for the renovation, or, more properly speaking, the construction of Maudie's wardrobe, and he did not choose in his sturdy independence that his young sister should be a charge upon anyone while he was able by hard work to provide for her.

"I'd rather supply what is wanted myself, thanking you kindly all the same, ma'am," he said, with such an air of offended dignity that Mrs. Gibson could not forbear laughing in his face.

"Oh, you shall have the privilege of paying for the finery, if that pleases you best! So just bring your sister along next time you come to the city, with as many dollars as you can comfortably spare, and I will see to the spending of them. You need not be afraid to trust me either, for I learned prudence and economy in a hard school when I was young; but that is between ourselves, and we don't talk about those times now," she said with a quick look round, as if fearful

lest the smartly-upholstered furniture should rise up to taunt her for the poverty of her past.

Jim took his leave when all the details of Maudie's going were settled. He had the feeling of having been weak to cowardice in giving way so easily, yet but for that trouble about Basil no one would have rejoiced more than he at this wonderful chance of enjoyment that had come in his young sister's way.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAUDIE GOES TO TOWN

GREATLY troubled though he was on Basil's behalf, Jim did his errand as faithfully as if no other interests were involved, telling Maudie of Mr. Gibson's invitation, and urging her acceptance of it as an advantage to be greatly prized, and an opportunity which could hardly be expected to come again.

Maudie flushed high with pleasure, whilst her eyes shone at the prospect of such unlooked-for delights, but she hesitated all the same about accepting, because of the difficulty of sparing her during the heavy and dangerous work of the autumn fishery.

"If Mrs. Gibson would let me wait until the year has turned, the work is so much lighter in the early spring," she began; but Jim cut her objections short with an almost shocked air of protest.

"It is not to be thought of, Maudie, we could not presume to ask a lady like Mrs. Gibson to move the time of her invitation either forward or backward to suit our convenience. Of course we shall miss you, and the work will go all the heavier wanting your presence. But Paul will lend a hand in the curing-sheds, and we'll worry through somehow, never fear,"

he said with cheery insistence, keeping down with a strong hand the doubt and trouble in his own heart.

"Yes, Maudie, indeed you must go; it is high time you had a peep at the world outside the Inlet, and you will enjoy fluttering your wings for a little while," Mrs. Neal said smiling, though there was a suspicious moisture in her eyes, as she thought how lonely the place would seem without the brisk, energetic comings and goings of Maudie.

Even Paul joined forces with Mrs. Neal and Jim, and in the face of such an overwhelming majority Maudie had no choice but to give way, especially as her own desires were going in the same direction.

There was a brief bustle of preparation, and then a week later she sailed with Jim for Victoria, the whole population, dogs included, turning out to see her depart.

The going was a wrench when it came to the point. And Maudie's spirits went down to zero when she realized how many days and weeks might pass before she saw the Inlet again.

The morning was fine for the season, though dark clouds were creeping up from the ocean, which boded heavy weather later on. A feeble streak of sunshine even made its way through the thick curtains of mist, and fell athwart the schooner just before her moorings were loosed.

"See, Maudie, the sun shines on your going, so you are bound to have a good time!" cried Mrs.

Neal, with a great assumption of gaiety, as she stood on the landing-stage with Ron in her arms.

"It is going to rain bucketsful in half an hour at the outside, so I am afraid your theory won't stand, unless, indeed, I am to have a good time at the beginning and a bad one later on," she called back, forcing a smile, and waving her hand to the group on shore, as the schooner dropped off, and the rift of water between the boat and the land grew swiftly wider.

Mrs. Neal and Paul stood watching until the schooner had been worked out of the harbour-pool, and was moving down the Inlet towards the open sea, but Hooee had carried Ron indoors out of the damp, whilst the other denizens of the shore had betaken themselves to their respective occupations, even the dogs had departed to search for appetizing morsels among the heaps of fish-offal outside the curing-sheds.

"Fancy to yourself, if you can, how dull we shall be without her. Do you think she will ever come back, Mrs. Neal?" Paul asked abruptly, his face looking drawn and gray in the pale light, for the sunbeam had been but a vanishing gleam that had been swift to fade away.

"Why, yes, I should hope so," replied that lady with a start. "What put such a gloomy thought into your head, Paul?"

"I think it was in my heart first," the boy said,

with wistful quaintness. "Everyone goes away, no one ever comes back."

"Oh, but they do!" she rejoined with forced brightness. "See how many times Mr. Belloc has gone away and come back again. Then, when Maudie and I went to the city, we came back, before you expected us too," she went on, with a wan little smile, though her lips were quivering.

"I know, but see how sad you have been ever since; and though you wear yourself out in trying to make other people happy and comfortable, your eyes are always full of trouble," he said, his gaze searching her face with an affectionate scrutiny, as though to see if the shadow he complained of lurked there still. "But see how many have gone away from me who have never come back—my father, my mother, whom I never knew but always wanted, and Basil."

"Your father and mother cannot come back to you, yet you may go to them," she said quickly. "But Basil may return any day, he may even come back rich. Have you thought of it, Paul?"

"He might certainly, but I don't expect it; for to be rich one must know how to hold money as well as how to make it, and Basil never could do that," the boy rejoined soberly.

"Paul, you are a philosopher!" laughed Mrs. Neal, and then the two went back to the house, just as the rain began to fall smartly.

Jim said it was the very wettest trip he had ever taken, for it rained not merely all day but every day, and every night too; in fact, it did not leave off from the hour the schooner left the Inlet until she swung to her moorings alongside the Victoria quay.

By this time Maudie's regrets at leaving home had merged into delighted anticipations of the joys in prospect, and she stepped into the cab which was to convey her to Mrs. Gibson's abode with a face so radiant, that even Jim's sombre countenance reflected it back in a smile.

"Good-bye, Maudie! I hope you will have a good time," he said, his voice a little husky as he stood by the door of the cab.

"Good-bye, Jim dear! It was lovely of you to make me come, for I feel now that I would not have missed it on any account," she retorted gaily.

"That is as it should be. But, Maudie, I'd be happier by a long way if—"

His sentence was never finished, for at that moment a hand dropped on his shoulder, and a voice greeted him, which could belong to no one saving Tom Everson.

Maudie's cheeks flushed a more vivid red, but her manner was quite easy, and outwardly unmoved, as she leaned forward to greet the new-comer.

"Do you know, Mr. Everson, that I have come to Victoria on quite a long visit," she said, as she shook hands with Basil's former friend.

"Yes, Mrs. Gibson told me. I often go there in the evenings. She is wonderfully kind and good to lonely and unattached fellows like myself, and we take care to avail ourselves of the privilege of her friendship to the fullest extent, I can assure you," he said, his keen eyes taking swift note of the new developments in Maudie, her improved speech and manner, and the utter absence of the self-conceit which had struck him so unpleasantly on that day when he paid his first visit to the Inlet.

"Mrs. Gibson is kind to most people, I think," she replied; and then the cab drove away, leaving Tom Everson and Jim standing together on the sidewalk.

"My dear child, I am just delighted to see you, and I do declare you are more blooming than ever!" exclaimed Mrs. Gibson, as she held Maudie at arm's-length for inspection, after a warm greeting.

"My face is always so red! it is the fault of the wind and the spray, I suppose," she answered, putting up one hand to rub her glowing cheeks.

"It is not a fault by any means, whatever may be its cause. But, my dear child, you don't mean to tell me that you go fishing in these wet, stormy days?" cried Mrs. Gibson, looking as shocked as she felt, and drawing her young guest nearer to the blazing fire of Nanaimo coal.

"Indeed I do, I have been out every day, Sundays excepted, through all the bad weather. And one night

Jim and I were anchored off the banks in a terrible gale, which threatened every moment to drive us from our anchorage and fling us on the rocks, which would have meant speedy destruction. Oh, but that was a terrible time!" and Maudie shivered at the remembrance, whilst the colour in her cheeks paled visibly.

"Not another word about it, my dear, or even a thought. I will not have any horrors to darken your days here; and I will give that wise, good brother of yours a few hints concerning what is a suitable occupation for a girl to earn her living at," said Mrs. Gibson, as she put Maudie into an easy-chair and made much of her.

"But the occupation in this case was entirely my own choice. Jim was very much averse to my being out in all weathers at first, but when he found how happy I was in my work he gave way, as he almost always does when I want a thing very badly," she replied with a smile, quickly followed by a sigh, as she remembered the cloud which had hovered over Jim's face ever since that stormy night when the man from Juneau was rescued from the turbulent sea, only to die on board the schooner.

"The life has certainly done you no harm so far as looks go, but it is too rough for a girl. Have you never found it so?" Mrs. Gibson asked, as she flitted to and fro attending to the comfort of her guest.

Maudie hesitated, but she was too straightforward

by nature to be an adept in the art of dissembling, and the truth came out, although she experienced a shrinking reluctance at confessing even to her kindly hostess the revolt against fate which had of late raged in her heart.

"I never used to mind the roughness or find it irksome until home began to grow so much nicer and prettier. But since Mrs. Neal came to live with us, and I have seen how gentle and refined she is, it has set me longing to be like her; and it is not easy to be dainty in appearance, or to speak in a low, sweet voice, when one is fishing all day from a dirty canoe, and shouting orders to half a dozen Indians."

"Then why not leave it and take to some more reasonable employment?" said Mrs. Gibson, who looked with disfavour on all work for women which was not entirely feminine in character and purpose.

Maudie shook her head with a rather mournful smile. "I cannot leave it now. If Basil had stayed at home, or if Paul did not fear the sea so much, it would be different. As it is, Jim cannot do without me, and I am, so to speak, bound hard and fast in a rope of my own twisting."

"A way of freedom is sure to be found somehow," Mrs. Gibson said, nodding her head with an air of profound wisdom. "And for money people can always be procured to do things."

"Yes, I know they can. The worst of it is, they do not always do the things in a satisfactory manner.

At least that was our experience when Jim was hurt, and we had to hire Captain Tilney to do his work."

"Ah! Thorpe Tilney is not a very dependable person, although even he has his good points, and can be exceedingly good company when he chooses. By the way, did you know that he was nephew to Preece Morgan?"

"No indeed! Are you sure?" asked Maudie in an agitated voice, whilst her heart beat so fast that she thought Mrs. Gibson would hear it and wonder what ailed her.

The lady's attention was, however, momentarily diverted by the entrance of afternoon tea. In the business of sugaring and creaming the cups she failed to notice the rising excitement of her guest.

"Yes, I am quite sure, because he told me so himself. I don't think he meant to be so confidential, but things led up to it, and the fact was out before he realized it. Then he explained why he had been so reticent about the connection in the past. It seems that Thorpe Tilney was the son of Preece Morgan's favourite sister, and had always been brought up to believe that his uncle would do something for him. But the old prospector, although very well off, had always been averse to parting with his money, and so the fulfilment of the half-made promise was always being put off, until Thorpe Tilney's patience wore threadbare and his pride rose in revolt against the mercenary treatment of his uncle, and when he

came to Victoria he determined to say nothing of his relationship to Preece Morgan, nor yet to go near him."

"And did he never go to see him?" asked Maudie, sitting erect in her chair, and pressing her hand tightly against her side to still the beating of her heart.

"He says not, and indeed there was not much time, for in less than a week after his arrival in the city Preece Morgan came by his death in that tragic manner. But I am forgetting that is an unpleasant subject for you, my dear, and must therefore be tabooed."

"On the contrary, it has been very interesting, and I thank you for telling me," replied Maudie, suddenly rising and standing erect as if confronted by some problem too hard to solve; then, sinking back in her chair once more, she burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing, to the surprise and alarm of her hostess and her own intense mortification.

CHAPTER XIX

AGITATING REFLECTIONS

MAUDIE'S sudden indisposition was alleged by Mrs. Gibson to be due to the heat of the room, which must of necessity be close and stuffy in comparison with the conditions to which she was accustomed.

There was no desire on Maudie's part to combat this theory, indeed she was only too thankful that Mrs. Gibson should have arrived at so safe a conclusion on the subject, since it saved her from the necessity of explaining her foolish breakdown. And when she was ordered with affectionate peremptoriness to rest for an hour in her own room before dressing for dinner, she obeyed the mandate with grateful alacrity.

Mrs. Gibson came herself to see that Maudie was comfortably settled on the wide, deep lounge before the bed-room fire, and insisted on opening one of the windows, although a strong, damp wind was blowing, in order to ensure against a repetition of the hysterical attack.

But despite these precautions, no sooner was Maudie left alone than she burst into a passion of weeping,

smothering her face in the cushions, through the fear lest some stray sob might attract the attention of any one in the corridor outside.

The tears were induced by the sense of her own helplessness to verify a suspicion, strong as a certainty, which had sprung up in her heart, as to the identity of the man who had injured Preece Morgan.

It had come to her in a flash when Mrs. Gibson had spoken of Captain Tilney's relationship to the dead prospector. What was more likely than that the nephew, finding himself stranded in Victoria, should go to seek assistance from the uncle who had for so long held out a vague promise of help. Her lively fancy painted the resultant scene in vivid colours as she lay sobbing face downwards on the cushions of the lounge —the almost penniless young man begging for substantial assistance, the close-fisted prospector temporizing and reluctant, perhaps altogether refusing to part with his dearly-loved dollars, then a quarrel, with high words followed by hard blows, and the escape unrecognized of the man whose hand had dealt them.

No wonder that with agitating reflections like these, Maudie speedily wrought herself into a condition bordering perilously near her previous lapse into hysteria. But she had plenty of common sense, and this she summoned to her aid with such good effect, that she was soon sitting erect and facing the situation with self-control.

Bitterly did she reproach herself for her harsh judgment of Basil, who doubtless had been more sinned against than sinning. For a time after the discovery that not he, but Mr. Neal, had written that threatening letter to Preece Morgan, she had regarded Basil as the innocent victim of another man's knavery; but when the man from Juneau had spoken of Basil and Charley Neal being in partnership, she had with her wonted impulsiveness judged it to be a fellowship of guilt.

Since that time no thought had been hard enough, or bitter enough, to sum up her estimation of her absent brother's character, and she had become so used to condemning Basil in her heart, that it seemed the most proper and natural thing to denounce him with her tongue.

Little wonder, then, that she lapsed into the weakness of hysteria, when the flash of illuminating light upon the situation showed her the probability of her having been entirely and terribly wrong in her conclusions.

Suppose that flash had not come in time to prevent her putting the police on Basil's track, and trouble had ensued in consequence. She shivered at the thought, calling up a picture of Jim's stern, sad face and Basil's cutting words of blame. How her brothers would have hated her! Yes, she decided, judging them by her own standard, they must certainly have hated her, and the breach between them

would have been too sore for even time's gentle healing.

But now—well, certainly matters looked hopeless enough, and there seemed slight prospect of the muddle being disentangled. Still, things often looked worse than they really were, and Maudie's temperament was sufficiently sanguine for her to find comfort in this reflection.

Whilst she was dressing for dinner she remembered that Tom Everson had mentioned a certain Captain Clark, as having seen Basil come out of Preece Morgan's hut on the night of the tragedy, and she determined that her first effort on her brother's behalf must be in the direction of finding this man.

Dressing for dinner that evening was not a very elaborate affair, owing to the limitations of her wardrobe. But she was so extremely nervous at this first plunge into a new life, that the preparing for it was quite an ordeal in itself.

The Gibsons, like most other people connected with shipping interests in Victoria at that time, kept practically open house to their numerous clients and friends: so there was a constant coming and going of people at their table, where visitors were the rule rather than the exception.

It so chanced that Tom Everson, and an old sea-captain hailing from the Sandwich Islands, were the only guests at dinner that evening, so Maudie's shyness was of a very evanescent character, since the old

captain was as homely in manner and style as her own brother Jim, and the others were familiar faces.

But her colour kept coming and going, and her dark eyes flashed with pleasurable excitement, making her beauty of an unusually dazzling character, as she took in the details of the unwonted scene—the large, handsome dining-room, with its soft, bright lights, and the flower-decked table gleaming with glass and silver.

That she herself was the most attractive detail of the room never once entered her head; she did not even take seriously the old sea-captain's loudly-uttered aside to Mrs. Gibson, "A monstrous fine gal that! Is she a native, or one of them bouncing Yankees?"

Mrs. Gibson's reply was not audible to Maudie, whose attention was just then claimed by her host, who had some question to ask concerning Mrs. Neal and her boy, and the probable duration of their stay at the Inlet.

"Oh! Mrs. Neal is a fixture," she answered, with a kindling smile; "that is, of course, unless her husband arrives to take her away. We should be quite lost without her now, and Paul and I love her dearly."

"Poor little woman, I am very glad she found such a comfortable home at the first, for it was a cruel shame, her husband going off and leaving her stranded amongst strangers, and almost penniless too. I told Mrs. Gibson when I came home that Jim Belloc was the best Christian I knew, because of his willingness

to give her a home, and work to do, without a shadow of reference, and burdened with the child too," said Mr. Gibson, who had a very tender place in his heart for all forlorn women and children.

"I went to Alberni a few weeks back, and stayed a night with the fellow who has taken Neal's place. He is doing well too, and making money. It was a thousand pities the other man threw it up after coming so far to take it," broke in Tom Everson, who had been very silent hitherto, taking little part in the conversation, though he had been using his eyes freely enough in noting the varying play of colour in Maudie's cheeks and the flashing delight in her luminous eyes, mentally contrasting her present appearance as she sat erect and slim in her place at table, garbed in a simple white frock, with the wind-blown dishevelled maiden to whom he had been introduced that day when the police-boat took him to the Inlet for the first time.

It was the same Maudie, only with a difference, who confronted him to-night across the expanse of white table-cloth, with its crystal and silver, and the rich colours of the bright-hued flowers. But it was difficult to realize that it was the same except when she laughed, or her full clear voice rose above the quieter tones of the others and seemed to make the room ring.

"I hope you do not expect me to agree with you, Mr. Everson, about it being a thousand pities Mr.

Neal ever went away," she said, with a bright quick laugh. "I am afraid we should be much more likely to consider it a thousand pities if he came back again."

"I was looking at the question from the stand-point of Mr. Neal's pocket, for of course he would have been a great deal better off by settling down to steady work at Alberni, than by rushing off to Alaska. Unless indeed he happens on some nuggets with the first shovelful of earth he turns over; but things do not often come out like that, and the hardships are usually out of all proportion to the gains."

Tom Everson was angry with himself for having so spoken, when he saw Maudie wince and turn pale at the thought of the hardships which might fall to Basil's lot in the land of the frozen North.

"It is all very well to discuss the matter from the stand-point of Mr. Neal's pocket, or even of Maudie's disinclination to part with a pleasant and helpful companion," said Mrs. Gibson. "But to my way of thinking there is a much more important factor in the question, and that is Mrs. Neal's own feeling."

"My dear, she can't be very deeply grieved at a temporary separation from a man like that," put in Mr. Gibson from the other end of the table. "Why, the man wasn't even decently kind to her, Captain Clark said, and he ought to know, seeing that they came over from the mainland in his boat."

"Captain Clark! Do you know him?" Maudie's

head came up with a jerk as she put the question, and her voice rang through the room as if she had been signalling to a canoe a quarter of a mile away.

"Why, yes, Miss Belloc, most people in Victoria do, seeing that he is, from the nature of his occupation, something of a public character. Is he a friend of yours?" Mr. Gibson asked, bending an amused look upon the excited girl.

"No, but I want to know him very badly. Will you introduce me to him?" she said eagerly, but in a much lower key, for it was only when taken unawares or very much excited that she forgot to control and manage that very big voice of hers.

"With the greatest of pleasure. I will bring him out to dinner to-morrow night—if he will come, that is. If not, I will take you down to the docks and we will hunt him out. He will not escape us, never fear," Mr. Gibson replied; and Maudie thanked him with effusion, then lapsed into an abstraction from which no attempts of Tom Everson to draw her into conversation could arouse her.

CHAPTER XX

DISAPPOINTMENT

THE next few days were spent by Maudie in an unsatisfying whirl of shopping, sight-seeing, and interviews of varying length, but unvarying tediousness, with the dressmaker, whose services had been retained by Mrs. Gibson on her young guest's behalf.

Mr. Gibson had not fulfilled his promise of bringing Captain Clark out to dinner, declaring, in answer to Maudie's questioning, that the sailor had important work on hand that week, which left him no time for social functions.

But he did not offer to take Maudie down to the docks, as at first he had suggested doing, and she found herself quite unusually irritated by the omission, not knowing that Mr. Gibson was under orders from his wife to move no farther in the matter.

Her secret excitement and unrest robbed her visit of the enjoyment she would have otherwise derived from the change, and the many novelties of her new experience. A feverish desire to see Basil righted, and a strong yearning that her hand might be the factor to set the machinery in motion, was upon her,

and it was hard work to even appear interested in any other subject.

Fortunately Mrs. Gibson was not a very discerning person, and Maudie's often-recurring fits of abstraction were believed by that lady to be the result of the newness and strangeness of her surroundings.

From having been in the first place merely attracted by Maudie's dazzling beauty, Mrs. Gibson had quickly become so attached to her, as to have already gone so far as to suggest to her husband that they should keep her in their home altogether, if by any means they could induce her to stay.

Hence the reason of the lady's mandate issued in private to her husband, that he should say nothing further to Maudie anent going to the docks, she having a shrewd suspicion that the sight of the sea and the shipping, combined with the smell of fish, might arouse some latent home-sickness in the breast of the girl, and make her long for the wild free life of the Inlet again.

If only Mrs. Gibson had known that the very means she was taking to wean Maudie from her old amphibious life, would prove the reason for making her young guest yearn for the former hard-working days and wild experiences of life on the water, she would doubtless have gone some other way to work.

Full soon the luxurious comforts of Mr. Gibson's suburban mansion began to pall upon the girl, whose previous days had been so replete with hard and

healthful toil. She had no appetite for the food she had not helped to earn, and existence lost something of its zest, because there was nothing to do but amuse herself from morning until night.

Then with a fiery impatience characteristic of her, she began to loathe the complimentary speeches which most of the men, young, old, and middle-aged, who frequented the house of Gibson, showered upon her.

The only person who did not so offend was Tom Everson, and yet in her heart of hearts Maudie knew that an approving word from him was worth infinitely more than anything else the world could offer her.

It had come to that already, and with much mental writhing and humiliation she had with her accustomed candour admitted the fact to her secret self, and with all the force of her nature striven to uproot and cast forth the new and unwelcome sensation.

People older and wiser than herself might have enlightened her as to the futility of such striving, but it was not a matter on which to wax confidential even with one's most intimate friend—and she had no mother.

So she endured in silence, holding her head very high when Tom Everson was near, and answering all his efforts at entertaining her with such caustic rejoinders that he decided she was quite the sharpest-tongued girl of his acquaintance.

As soon as her wardrobe was in the state of completeness deemed necessary by Mrs. Gibson, Maudie was duly launched on the little world of Victorian society, which, though doubtless somewhat colonial, and free and easy in comparison with society in England, was gay and amusing enough in its way.

The wildest rumours were afloat that winter concerning the richness of the Alaskan gold-yield; and many strangers had gathered in the city, awaiting the arrival of spring, and the consequent unlocking of the gates of ice which barred the way to the Northern El Dorado. Maudie grew to know many of these intending pioneers during the weeks of her stay with the Gibsons, and the eager hopefulness with which they spoke of the future always gave her a heart-sick sensation, for so Basil must have felt and spoken, and the thought that he might never come back was haunting her perpetually.

About a month after her coming to the city, and when her home-sickness and yearning to get back to the Inlet were upon her in full force, Mrs. Gibson gave what she was pleased to call a "small and early", but which might have been more correctly described as a "large and late", entertainment. To this a great number of men were bidden, and as many women as could be found disengaged, or were brave enough to face the inclemency of the night, for a furious snow-storm was raging.

The wide rooms were filled to overflowing, and as

usual the talk was all of gold, the unexampled richness of the Klondyke yield, the possibilities of an early spring, and wonder as to what might be happening to friends and acquaintances shut up in Dawson City, with perhaps famine and worse staring them in the face.

Maudie moved in and out among the various groups, talking to those she knew, and doing her best to assist Mrs. Gibson in entertaining the guests. She was looking unusually well to-night in a frock of soft white silk with a girdle of old silver, and no other ornament of any kind whatsoever. The moonlight character of her arraying toned down and modified her brilliant colouring, giving her quite an ethereal appearance.

Tom Everson noted this as he watched her, himself unseen, from a remote corner of the room. She did not smile so often, and her face in repose had a strained, tired look, as if some secret trouble were dragging at her heart.

"If she has a heart, that is," he muttered discontentedly, for the sharp-tongued, prickly maiden was proving distractingly fascinating, and he knew himself to be in considerable danger of losing his head, and his heart as well, in that same unpromising direction.

There was to be dancing later on, but that was an exercise for which Maudie showed little aptitude and less inclination. Mrs. Gibson declared this to be a

result of her defective education, but more probably it was owing to her strenuous life, and the hard-working days, which left her too tired for active pleasure of any kind.

When the sets began to form, she retreated to a quiet corner near one of the doors opening on to the entrance-hall, in order to be out of the way of the dancers. She was talking to a pair of rather uninteresting dowagers, when her attention was arrested by a short, thick-set man of nautical aspect, who leaned against a big cabinet, swaying to and fro all the time, like a big seal floundering in a heavy sea.

"Who is that gentleman yonder?" she asked, addressing her query to the younger and more garrulous of the ladies with whom she had been chatting.

"That? Oh! Captain Clark. He is master of one of the smaller boats plying between the city and the mainland. I am rather surprised to see him here to-night. Mrs. Gibson is not usually so indiscreet as to invite him to affairs like these, for as a rule he is not presentable after supper," replied Mrs. Simpson, with a virtuous air, which was meant to emphasize her superiority to the person she condemned as unfit to associate with his fellows.

"Captain Clark!" Maudie drew herself erect with a start, whilst the colour flamed into her face and her eyes flashed with pleasure. "Oh, Mrs. Simpson, would you be so very kind as to introduce me to him?

I want to know him so very badly!" she exclaimed impulsively.

But Mrs. Simpson froze instantly, and answered with chilly curtness, "It is not usual in our set for girls to solicit introductions to men, more especially when the people they desire to know are not even gentlemen." There was a cutting emphasis on the last word which made Maudie wince.

Then her temper rose, and she flung up her head with the air of a tragedy queen. In the old days she would doubtless have stamped on the floor and burst into passionate invective, but the conventionalism of civilized society had already left its mark upon her, and she merely turned away with a murmured "Excuse me if you please", and, catching sight of Tom Everson, who still lounged discontentedly in his corner, she made her way towards him with a smile of greeting.

"Good-evening, Mr. Everson! Will you do me a favour?" she asked, her voice ringing through the buzz of many conversations, and attracting an attention she would just then gladly have dispensed with.

"Certainly, if it is in my power, that is," he answered. "What is it you require, Miss Belloc?"

"I want to be introduced to Captain Clark. He is standing by that big cabinet yonder," she replied, her voice rising clearer and louder from sheer nervousness now, for she did not from choice solicit favours from

Tom Everson, suspiciously ready though he had become to wait upon her beck and call.

But now he hesitated, looking dubious and uncomfortable. "I don't think you would greatly care for his acquaintance, Miss Belloc, he is not exactly a ladies' man."

Her hands were flung out with a gesture of swift impatience. "Do you suppose that I should desire his acquaintance if he were? But do not trouble yourself, Mr. Everson, I can speak to Captain Clark without an introduction," she said, prepared to set conventionality at defiance, as she turned away with her head held high in offended dignity.

"Pray forgive me, it was for your own sake I hesitated. I will introduce you at once," he said humbly, yet with so much disapproval in his voice as he walked by her side to where the old captain was standing, that Maudie hardened her heart and was not appeased.

Captain Clark looked considerably surprised when Tom Everson formally presented Maudie to him, and the girl stretched out her hand in an eager gesture of welcome.

"Good-evenin', miss! I hope you are well," he said, with a strong nasal intonation which betrayed his Yankee origin, as he drew his loose-limbed figure up with a jerk, and performed the very best bow of which he was capable.

"I have wanted to meet you for a very long time,"

Maudie said, with her usual straightforwardness, coming to the point without any preliminary skirmish of small talk.

"I'm proud to hear it, miss," said the astonished captain, getting himself into position for another bow, yet grimacing a little as if the exercise hurt him.

But this was lost upon Maudie, who had turned with a gesture of abrupt dismissal to Tom Everson, for she had an instinctive dislike to question Captain Clark whilst he remained at her elbow.

Tom Everson flushed a dull red of annoyance as he withdrew, considering himself decidedly affronted by this summary casting aside.

But Maudie was wholly innocent of any intention of offence, being entirely absorbed by the purpose for which she had so earnestly sought the old captain's acquaintance.

"I think you used to know my brother Basil," she began rather nervously, keeping her voice well in hand, however, though she did not find it so easy to manage the rioting tumultuous colour on her cheeks.

"Not that I'm aware of, miss, though maybe I've seen the gentleman somewhere, for sartinly I do happen upon a goodish few strangers in the course o' daily life," the captain answered, with an uneasy shuffle of his feet, as if decidedly afraid of getting out of his depth.

"Oh yes! I am sure you must have known him quite well," she interposed hurriedly, "for Mr. Ever-

son told my brother Jim that you asserted having seen Basil Belloc leave Preece Morgan's house on the night of—of—of the occurrence." Her face was alternately flushing and paling now with the intensity of her excitement, and she drew a step nearer, whilst her eager gaze searched the astonished countenance of the old salt.

"You don't never mean that you are own sister to Jim and Basil Belloc!" he exclaimed, putting up his hand to rumple his hair, and looking as amazed as he felt.

"Yes, I am, stepsister at least," she replied, laughing a little at his ludicrous surprise, but quickly becoming grave again as she asked in a low tone: "Are you quite, quite sure it was Basil you saw that night, Captain Clark?"

"Why shouldn't I be sure?" he demanded quickly, reading in her manner the strong suspicion she held that he was mistaken.

"Because there are other people in the world so much like Basil in figure and general outline that in the dark you might so easily have been misled," she said.

"By whom? Just for the sake of argument, you know," he said, with a sudden interest, whilst the excitement in her face was reflected upon his stolid weather-beaten countenance.

"Oh! there are several. Mr. Neal, for instance, Jim said that he was remarkably like Basil, or—or Captain

Tilney," Maudie said, with a sudden distressful wonder as to whether her suggestion laid her open to a charge of libelling the individuals in question.

"It certainly worn't Charley Neal, for I had only just left him playing poker at Bullock's Hotel. But Thorpe Tilney—that's quite a different ticket," Captain Clark said, rumpling his hair so wildly in his efforts at remembering, and rightly reproducing the scenes and impressions of that night, that he looked as if he had just come off second-best at a pillow-fight.

"Ah, talk of an angel, and you know what happens! Good-evening, Miss Belloc! And pray may I ask whether it is my vices or my virtues that you are discussing?" said a familiar voice at Maudie's elbow; and, turning, she saw Thorpe Tilney at her side.

But she was too surprised and confused to be able to reply, and it was Captain Clark who answered for her.

"We was saying, cap'en, that if it came to taking a Bible oath on the business, I could not be sartin, not positively sartin, you know, whether it was you or young Basil Belloc that I saw sneakin' away from Preece Morgan's house that night."

Thorpe Tilney fell back a step with a darting gleam of fear in his eyes, then rallied himself by a swift effort, and asked with an indifference which was palpably feigned, "Which night? And may I ask—if it is not a secret—what are you talking about?"

Captain Clark explained at length, whilst Maudie

stood by his side in a hot distressful silence, wishing she had never mentioned the matter, yet at the same time quivering with eagerness to know what Thorpe Tilney's answer would be.

His tone was ironical and contemptuous when he did speak. "Sorry I can't oblige you, I'm sure, seeing there's a lady in the case. But it is impossible to be in two places at once, and on the night in question I was dining with an old San Francisco chum at Esquimault, and did not return to Victoria until the next day."

A feeling of helplessness and despair seized upon Maudie then. The disappointment was almost too bitter to be borne. She had built her hopes on being able to make Captain Clark say it was not Basil he had seen, and just as strongly, though more unconsciously, she looked forward to being able to place the blame where she was so sure that it belonged, namely, upon Captain Tilney, whom she had instinctively disliked from the first.

Captain Clark, however, appeared to view the affair in the light of a good joke, and, flinging back his head, burst into a guffaw of laughter, before which Maudie fled incontinently.

She was making for the safe shelter of her own room, in order that her trouble might find its natural vent in tears, when Ah Tell, the Chinaman waiter, met her in the corridor, informing her that a very fierce and shockingly dirty flat-head Indian waited in the

kitchen regions to obtain speech with her, having a letter to give her which he would deliver to no hands but her own.

"What is the man's name?" asked Maudie, a chill sense of coming ill stealing into her heart.

"Him say he welly most often called Catch-who-can," replied Ah Tell glibly.

"Katchewan?" cried Maudie, and then with a great fear in her heart she turned to follow Ah Tell.

CHAPTER XXI

AN ADVENTUROUS JOURNEY.

KATCHEWAN, accompanied by one of his own tribe, stood grim and silent amid the hurrying, chattering troop of Chinese servants comprising Mrs. Gibson's household staff.

It was characteristic of him that he had refused to be seated or to partake of any refreshments until his errand was accomplished, and he had stood for an hour in the same immovable attitude, the snow which had covered him in a thick coating of white melting in the summer warmth of the big kitchen, and forming a pool of wet on the floor.

His comrade, on whom no responsibility devolved, was already slumbering peacefully, stretched out on the floor at the rear of the big cooking-stove; and if Katchewan cast any longing looks in the same direction, he kept his statuesque pose unbroken, waiting stolidly on until his business could receive attention.

But when Maudie, following in the wake of Ah Tell, came gliding in satin slippers across the stone floor of the wide kitchen, her silken draperies gathered in one arm out of reach of chance contamination from the ground, and her silver girdle gleaming in the

light, Katchewan's native stolidity broke up in amazement and admiration, causing him to fire off such a volley of "Ahs" and "Ehs" as startled the Chinese servants almost into fits.

"Did you come in the schooner, Katchewan?" asked Maudie, shivering in spite of herself.

"Ah!" grunted the Indian in solemn negative.

"Overland, and in this weather?" she cried in amazement.

"Eh! Much good snow, rivers frozen, snow-shoe do him quick journey. Boss Jim sick, very bad. Ah!" The last ejaculation was in the shape of a sorrowful grunt, at the same movement Katchewan drew forth a letter from some inner recess of his garments, and handed it to Maudie, breaking forth again into ejaculations of surprise and amazement as he surveyed her dainty array.

Jim was ill! Maudie's fingers shook as she broke open the envelope. It was all she could do in the strained tension of her nerves to keep from sobbing outright even before she knew the worst.

As it was, the knowledge of the worst braced her into quiet strength again, and by the time she had read the letter she was able to decide what must be done, and act upon it straightaway.

The letter was from Mrs. Neal, and stated that Jim was very ill, apparently with rheumatic fever, and that a doctor was an urgent necessity. Failing any boat about to start for Alberni, which could put in

at the Inlet with the much-needed man of medicine, Katchewan had brought with him a small sledge in which to convey the doctor home overland.

It was bad, about as bad as it could be, yet Maudie felt it might be worse, and made up her mind that when the doctor went she also would go, even if she had to make the journey on snow-shoes, lending a hand at towing the sledge between whiles.

"Yum, I want you to take particularly good care of these two friends of mine," she said, addressing herself to the Chinese cook, a fat and very important functionary. "Feed them well, and give them a warm place to lie down in, for the morning must find them rested enough for travel."

Yum promised a ready and instant compliance with this request, and Maudie hurried away to find Mr. Gibson, in order to consult him about procuring a doctor who would be willing to take the long and arduous journey to the Inlet.

The guests were beginning to depart, and the crowd in the reception rooms had thinned considerably, since Maudie rushed away from the sound of Captain Clark's grating laughter.

Mr. Gibson was talking to an elderly gray-haired man, whom Maudie knew slightly as a naval surgeon from Esquimault, and deciding hurriedly that one doctor would do as well as another, she went up to them and stated her case.

"I would go directly if there were any possible

means of getting there, but no boat will put out for Alberni in weather like this, and I have no more idea of snow-shoeing than I have of ballooning," Dr. Ramsay said, when he had listened to Maudie's story of her brother's sore sickness.

"Oh! that will not matter. Katchewan has brought a small sledge in which he and Kamloo can drag you, whilst I can help them pull where the snow is deepest or the hills are very bad," she replied in an eager tone, only too happy to think that there was a prospect of the question concerning the doctor being settled so speedily.

"But you are not going?" exclaimed Mr. Gibson, with a blank look of amazement.

"Indeed I must go. Picture to yourself how badly I am needed at home, with Jim so desperately ill, and everything out-of-doors going to sixes and sevens, lacking the care of the master. It is a good thing that I have done so much snow-shoeing, because I shall be able to get over the ground as fast as the Indians," she said, drawing her breath in quick pants as if eager to be starting.

"Mrs. Gibson will never consent. She will say it is not proper for a young girl like you to start on such a toilsome journey," Mr. Gibson said, rubbing his hands in genuine perplexity, and looking as uncomfortable as he felt, at the prospect of a battle-royal between his wife and Maudie over the question of a forty-mile journey on snow-shoes.

"I shall go," the girl replied quietly, but there was a mutinous flash in her dark eyes, and so much resolution in voice and attitude that Mr. Gibson shrugged his shoulders and said no more.

"Yes, my dear, you shall go, and I will do my best to take care of you, though I don't mind admitting it will be a desperate humiliation for me to sit in a sledge being towed uphill by a girl," Dr. Ramsay put in, with a smile at the picture his words had called up.

He arranged with Maudie about the start, which was to be made with the first glimmer of dawn, and then went off to knock up the nearest chemist in order to lay in a stock of drugs and medicines to take with him, whilst Maudie went in search of Mrs. Gibson.

Contrary to everyone's expectation, that lady raised no objection to Maudie's sudden departure, being wise enough to see the urgent need there was of the girl's immediate presence in the home at the Inlet. Heartily sorry though she was to lose Maudie's bright companionship, she was not so selfish as to want to keep her at such a crisis; whilst the journey, hard and hazardous though it was, could not be regarded as impossible when made in company with Dr. Ramsay and two such expert snow-shoers as Jim's Indians.

For two brief hours Maudie lay down to rest; she even slept a little, although her dreams were of the tortuous, uncomfortable kind which made her glad to wake again. Then in the chill, dark hour before

dawning, she rose and dressed for the journey in the old costume of thick blanket skirt and warm jersey in which she had been accustomed to brave all kinds of weather on the Inlet.

How good it was to be dressed for toil once more! And although the long journey through the snow would strain her endurance to the utmost, she would have been blithe of heart and gay at the prospect but for Jim's illness.

Mrs. Neal had not asked her to come home; the letter had been so hurriedly written, and was so full of directions about sending a doctor quickly, that there had been no room for anything more. But they would surely expect to see her. And Maudie's heart beat fast with pleasurable anticipations of the dear home-welcome she would have, even though the weight of her fear for Jim lay all the time heavy upon her.

The doctor was ready and waiting when she went downstairs; a queer-looking figure all muffled up in furs, for the weather grew colder every hour, and threatened to make a record in severity.

A hasty breakfast taken, all standing, as Dr. Ramsay phrased it; then, just as the first pale glimmer of dawn forced its way through the black curtains of night, the four travellers set forth.

There were snow-drifts in all directions; the streets were so blocked that horse traffic even with sleighs was impossible, until the soft yielding masses grew

more firmly compacted together. But the Indians went as easily as if they trod on air, whilst even Maudie after the first mile or so skimmed the white surface of the snow as lightly as a bird, so that the pace made was astonishing, and almost incredible to anyone not used to that method of transit.

A long rope was attached to the sledge, and fastening this to his girdle of walrus-hide, Katchewan took the lead, since the responsibility of taking the trail safely across the trackless waste depended upon him. Following him came Kamloo harnessed in the same fashion, then the sledge, into which Dr. Ramsay had been packed as tightly as herrings in a barrel, being so wedged in with parcels that it was all but impossible for him to move.

Maudie was behind, but fastened to the sledge by a rope like the Indians, with the difference that whilst they pulled the sledge, her rope was for the purpose of being towed over the rough places where she could not otherwise maintain the pace made by the Indians.

The going was rough and lumpy near the town, but once out in the open country matters became fairly easy; and although Dr. Ramsay was shaken and bumped until he began to wonder whether there would be a whole bone left in his body by the time the end of the journey was reached, the others found the exercise both exhilarating and enjoyable.

Presently Katchewan looked up at the sky, then

down on the yielding powdery snow covering the ground, snorted violently twice or thrice, and then said something in his own tongue to Kamloo, who immediately gazed skyward with great intensity, then grunted in imitation of his fellow.

Maudie immediately felt vaguely anxious and uneasy. The sky looked clear enough to her, and the wind blowing across the white solitude was as keenly cold as when it first started from the North Pole. But there was no dependence to be placed upon the Vancouver climate, except that one might always be sure of its raining sooner or later, mostly sooner.

Another two or three miles sped by, and then even to her an impending change of weather became apparent; the wind began to come in gusts, whilst fleecy white clouds trailed like dusty cobwebs across the clear blue of the sky, and the atmosphere became appreciably warmer.

"Katchewan, can we reach the tree-belt at the pace we are going before the weather breaks?" she shouted.

"Ah!" he snorted in surly discontent, for he hated to fail in his endeavours.

"If we increase the pace can we do it?" she cried, a thrill of anxiety in her voice now, for if the storm caught them in the open, there was scanty chance of their reaching the Inlet that night; it was one thing to skim over the ground on snow-shoes, and quite another to wade with painful slowness through

ankle-deep mud and water, and such delay in the arrival of the doctor might cost Jim his life.

"Eh!" grunted Katchewan, but in a dubious tone, as if admitting the bare possibility of its being accomplished.

"Fasten me in front then, and let me help pull. Don't waste time, every moment is of value!" she shouted in her most imperious tone, and waving aside with an impatient hand the protests of Dr. Ramsay, who felt exceedingly uncomfortable at the prospect of being towed by a girl.

Katchewan had no scruples on the score of turning his young mistress into a beast of burden for the nonce, and, calling a halt, he rapidly unfastened the ropes, and placing Maudie between himself and Kamloo, gave the word, or rather the snort which was the signal for starting again.

Now indeed the pace was a race, and Dr. Ramsay held on to the sledge with both hands, looking about for a soft place to fall upon, for the stumps of trees half-protruding through the snow would certainly make no easy resting-place for the unfortunate who chanced to be pitched upon them.

But no such accident happened, and soon, looming up on the edge of the horizon, he could see the dark foliage of fir-trees outlined against the sky, doubtless the tree-belt of which Maudie had spoken.

Small shrubs and berry-bushes dotted the plain now in every direction, but there were no longer any

houses or farms to be seen. It was a land of solitude, a fearsome and trackless waste for anyone who did not know how to steer his way in the wilderness, but apparently presenting no difficulties to Katchewan, who forged ahead without the least hesitation.

They reached the tree-belt before the storm broke, although the sky was now overcast and gray; the sun, too, had entirely disappeared, and the wind swept in howling gusts across the plain, bending the tall trees until it looked as if they must snap off short with the strain.

"We shall not be long now, it is only about ten miles from here to the Inlet," Maudie said, perching for a brief rest on the front part of the sledge.

"And you consider the worst of the journey over?" the doctor asked, with a sigh of relief at the temporary rest from jolting.

"So Katchewan says, but I have never done the journey before. It is all but impossible, except when there is heavy snow like this, you see, because of the marshy places and the lack of a road," she answered, as with a bright backward nod she went forward to take her place upon the rope again.

But the doctor could see that the strain was telling upon her, despite her courageous bearing, and as if to make matters worse, just as they entered the gloom of the pine-forest a heavy dash of rain struck them full in the face.

CHAPTER XXII

WITH THE TURN OF THE TIDE

JIM BELLOC had been ill for more than a week, and for the last two days he had lain at death's door.

His sickness had been brought on apparently by exposure to cold and damp in the pursuit of his calling, but Mrs. Neal and Paul both believed it was anxiety concerning Basil that had broken the strong constitution down. All his life Jim had been exposed to cold and wet, yet had never suffered from their effects until now, when the weight of worry was added to the burden.

"Paul, when does the tide turn to-night?" asked Mrs. Neal, with a great fear in her voice, coming out of the sick-room just as the early dark dropped like a pall over the Inlet.

"An hour before midnight. Why do you want to know?" he asked, looking up with a startled expression from the broth he was so carefully skimming.

Mrs. Neal sat down suddenly on the settle, covering her face with her hands. "Because I am afraid that without a doctor to help him he will not live past the turn of the tide, especially as it comes so near to

midnight," she said, a hard dry sob of despair tearing at her throat.

"What has the tide to do with it?" asked Paul, laying down his skimming-spoon to come and stand by the settle, his face white and drawn with anxiety, whilst his hands trembled like a girl's.

"Tides have a weird, strange influence on human life; I have often heard of it, and once before I have seen it proved. If the tide turned to-night at seven or eight o'clock even, I should not be so very much afraid, because Mr. Belloc would have more strength to meet and withstand the influence of the waters, but in the middle of the night he will be at his weakest and lowest, and—and—but oh, it is too dreadful to think of!"

"Don't think of it," he said, laying a trembling hand on her shoulder, but keeping his voice from quivering by a manful effort. "Lie down and get an hour's sleep, whilst I take care of him. It is little enough that you have had of rest lately, and you are fairly worn out by now," he urged, with gentle insistence.

"I left Hooee sitting by him. He is quieter now, but—" she began in a hesitating tone, for she was so weary that rest had become an imperative necessity if she was to find sufficient strength for the night, which might bring so great a strain.

"There is no but in the case—you must rest. I'll go and take care of him now, then Hooee will be free

to look after Ron and get supper ready in case the doctor comes to-night."

"Do you think he will come to-night—it is raining now, and hark to the wind?"

Paul went to the door and looked out at the wild raging of the elements, then, shutting it again, came back to stand a moment shivering by the fire. "It is fearfully rough, but if they started early this morning they might have reached the tree-belt before the storm broke. I wish we had asked Maudie to come too," he added wistfully.

"So do I. All day I have been reproaching myself that I did not beg her to come. But it is such a fearful journey across the snow, and I was anxious that there should be no delay in getting the doctor here," Mrs. Neal replied.

Paul sighed as he went to his brother's room. The lines on his face made him look stern and old, as he thought of the sorrow that might come before the morning dawned again.

Hooee came out when he went in, and, softly closing the door, he walked to the side of the bed, peering down at the invalid in the subdued light to see if any change for the worse had taken place since he was there last.

But there seemed no difference. Jim lay in a half-stupor, groaning sometimes, and with a look of trouble on his face, which only a week of sickness had made so white and thin. Outside the house the tide was

racing in and filling the harbour-pool. How would it be when flood was reached and the waters began to recede?

Sometimes during Paul's vigil in his brother's room he could catch above the roaring of the storm-wind the shrill, weird cries of the Indian women, who were holding some incantations on behalf of their sick boss —boiling charms in an old iron pot over the open fires which they had lighted outside their huts, and feasting on berries cooked in houlakan oil, all with the same laudable purpose in view, namely, the restoration to health of Jim Belloc.

It made Paul shiver again as he listened, and a keen self-reproach smote him for never having shown those poor heathens a better way. Slipping on his knees by Jim's bedside he prayed humbly for forgiveness for this past neglect, and for strength to make amends in the future.

"What is that?" asked Jim presently, rousing from his stupor and opening his eyes as a confused murmur of voices sounded coming towards the house.

There was a lull in the howling of the wind, which made other noises audible just then. Paul stood up, striving to distinguish some familiar sound which might serve as explanation of the cause.

"Perhaps it is some of the Indians. They are having a great feast to-night, and they may be walking the effects off," he answered, striving hard to keep all traces of his inward excitement from showing in

his voice. He believed the sounds heralded the doctor's approach, but Jim as yet did not even know that one had been sent for.

"Paul, Maudie has come; I can hear her voice. There's somebody else with her too. Oh, surely she can't have set the police on Basil's track, poor, foolish, headstrong girl!" he exclaimed, his tones trailing off into a groan of intense bitterness as he tried to lift himself on his pillow and could not.

"Keep steady there, Jim, old fellow. Perhaps you are only dreaming, and it isn't Maudie at all," Paul said in a soothing manner, for he had not distinguished Maudie's voice, and was just preparing to tell his brother of the doctor's expected advent, when the outer door of the house was opened and several people were heard entering the big family sitting-room.

"Paul, Paul, what is it?" gasped the invalid, making another ineffectual attempt to rise, and looking so near collapse that the boy, frightened almost out of his senses, rushed from the room crying urgently, "Oh, Mrs. Neal, come quick, Jim is worse! I'm afraid he is—" But before the ominous word which stuck in his throat could be uttered, a big figure wrapped in furs nearly fell over him, whilst an imperative voice said sharply, "Where is the sick man, boy? Take me to him at once. Dear me, I don't seem to have any life in my feet at all!" This with another lurch, which made Paul hasten to prop the

unsteady stranger up on one side, whilst Mrs. Neal came to his assistance on the other.

The room seemed filled with moving figures, streaming wet from the rain outside. Katchewan and Kamloo were there, then suddenly Paul saw another face, and exclaimed in an agitated whisper, "Maudie, is it really you? Jim said he heard your voice, but I told him that he must be dreaming!"

"Which only goes to prove that, sick or well, his hearing is better than yours," put in the doctor, who, having by this time succeeded in getting off the top layer of his heavy wet wraps, proceeded at once to the sick-room, conducted by Mrs. Neal.

Maudie wanted to go also, but the doctor shut the door in her face, telling her to put on dry clothing and get warmed and fed.

"I am warm enough," she said petulantly, turning away from the shut door. "But I admit that I am damp, for we had to take off our snow-shoes a mile back and simply wade for the rest of the way, and the rain is coming down in sheets."

"I wonder how you managed to keep the trail," said Paul, as he hastened to assist her in dragging off the native-made leather moccasins which she had worn in preference to boots for walking on snow-shoes.

"We could not have done it but for Katchewan and Kamloo knowing the tree-belt so well. Give them all the food you have to spare, Paul, and send them to me to rest," Maudie replied; and Paul hastened to

obey, giving out stores with a liberal hand, for the Indians had performed their errand well and promptly, and deserved the reward they received.

What a night that was! Outside, the storm raged and howled, sending whirling gusts of wet down the big chimney; whilst Maudie and Paul crouched close together on the big settle, waiting with sick foreboding for tidings from the invalid's room.

Sometimes Mrs. Neal came out for things needed by the doctor, or Paul stole in to softly mend the fire. But that was all, and the weary hours crept on until eleven o'clock came, the time of the turning of the tide.

The Indian women had long since ceased their shrieking incantations and gone to their rest, but the air was filled with the thunder of the surf on the coast outside the Inlet and the howling noise of the tempest.

The house itself was unnaturally quiet by contrast, the brooding silence seeming to deepen as the time went on. Half-past eleven came, but the quiet of the sick-room remained unbroken, and the people shut up there might have been asleep or dead for any sign of life or movement reaching the outer room. Then midnight struck with a whizzing, whirring noise from the American clock which hung above the settle, and at the same moment the door of Jim's room opened and Mrs. Neal came out.

"Come." she said softly, holding out her hand to

Maudie, "your brother is conscious and is asking for you. But oh, be careful what you say, for the doctor says everything depends on his strength being maintained through the next two hours."

Maudie rose from the settle, crossing the room with uncertain steps, her face ghastly white and her heart beating furiously. It was only since she had been listening to Paul's account of Jim's depression and gloom during the past few weeks that she realized how he must have suffered, since she had been staying in Victoria, through the fear of her betraying Basil's whereabouts to the police.

The fact brought with it instant and bitter humiliation. She had deemed her hot-headed impulse to be a righteous determination, and had clung to it with all the obstinate strength of her character, never deeming that the trouble of it might bring the brother who was innocent to the brink of the grave.

No wonder that her feet were unsteady and her gait uncertain as she entered the room and stood beside Jim's bed. The others, seeing how she trembled, deemed her exhausted with the tremendous effort of the day's journey, but Maudie knew herself a culprit in very truth, and suffered accordingly.

The yearning in Jim's eyes smote her with a yet more bitter self-reproach, and almost broke her courage down as she stooped to kiss him.

"Poor old Jim!" she murmured faintly, the mist

of her tears blurring her eyes so that she could hardly see the wan worn face on the pillow.

"Did you do it, Maudie?" he faltered, too near extremity to heed whether other ears caught his words or no.

"No, indeed I did not," she retorted eagerly. "And, Jim dear, I am quite positive that Basil is entirely innocent. I believe, too, in spite of his denials and representations, that I could put my hand on the man who hurt Preece Morgan, only because I cannot prove it I have to keep quiet. But I am sure that it was neither our Basil nor Mr. Neal."

"Thank God for so much mercy!" breathed a low fervent voice behind her, but Maudie did not heed it, being wholly absorbed with Jim and her own private and bitter repentance.

"Then if Basil comes back there will be no cause for heartache between him and you," he said weakly, but with a restful content stealing over his pain-worn troubled face. "It is good hearing, Maudie, and now that is settled I think I'll go to sleep, for I'm feeling about tired out." As he spoke Jim turned his face on the pillow and went to sleep, as easily and restfully as an infant might have done.

"He'll do now with good nursing," the doctor said, drawing a breath of relief, "and as I have been pretty well shaken to bits to-day I think I will go to bed."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BRAVERY OF PATIENCE

TWO years had slipped away, and again it was winter on the Inlet.

Little or no change had taken place in the household of the Bellocs, saving indeed the inevitable alterations wrought by time in its passing, which in this case had turned little Ron into a sturdy urchin of three years old, whose mightiest ambition was to go out in a boat and catch fish with Uncle Jim; whilst Paul had sprung up from a boy to a stripling, whose height and growth were out of all proportion to his strength.

His hatred of a seafaring life was as strong as ever, but that scarcely mattered now, seeing that twenty acres or more of land about the homestead had been brought into cultivation, and furnished Paul with ample scope for his energy and ingenuity; whilst the two cows, which were the latest addition to the agricultural venture, were fussed over and petted by him almost as if they were human beings.

Indoors, Mrs. Neal still bore rule, her face a little strained and sad in its quiet patience, but her bearing cheerful and brisk as of old.

There had never come a word out of the silence for her, from the husband who had left her so readily to go and enrich himself with Alaskan gold. Other men had gone the same way, some never to return, others to reappear like the prodigal in the parable, destitute and in want. Some few—but these were in scanty proportion, though naturally the world heard most about them—came back rich, making light of the hardships through which they had gone, and boasting largely of the marvellous riches of the Frozen Land. But Charley Neal neither came nor sent, and his wife, although she prayed for him daily, had ceased to look for his coming, or to expect it.

There had been no word of Basil either. Nor could the cautious enquiries made by Jim elicit any information as to his whereabouts.

The strain of this disappearance had made an elderly man of Jim, who looked as old as many a man of forty, and might well have passed as the father of Maudie and Paul.

Maudie used to tell him so sometimes, when she stole behind him as he sat at his ease on the big settle and tried to tweak the threads of silver from his dark hair. But Jim only smiled in the slow, patient fashion habitual with him, and said it did not matter how a man looked provided he felt all right.

Imperious and self-assertive still, but with every unpleasant angularity softened and held in check by a sweet womanliness, Maudie had fulfilled Mrs. Neal's

prophecy concerning her by developing into a gracious and noble woman. She was handsome too, even beyond the promise of her girlhood, but it was not the radiant beauty of her face which appealed to the observer so much as the sweetness of its expression.

Not that there were many to observe it, saving indeed the tribes of Indians passing that way, or the fishing fleets sometimes encountered along the coast; for Maudie was a very hermit in her mode of life, and not all the blandishments or entreaties of Mrs. Gibson could tempt her to Victoria again.

So she lived her old life of strenuous toil, and was happy in it; if the happiness held some contrasting bitterness down below out of sight, no one was aware of it but herself.

At first after she had come home, during the long weeks of Jim's weary convalescence, a curious waiting and unrest had been upon her; she always seemed watching for something or someone who never came. But when the weeks grew to months, and nothing disturbed the monotonous solitude of her daily life, she sighed a little grimly, and set herself to the task of wooing sweet content, that certain good which comes to all, if only they seek it earnestly enough.

The fishing business was known as "Belloc Brothers" still, only now it was Maudie and not Basil who represented the other brother.

Every week the schooner went to Victoria, carrying the supplies of fish caught by Maudie and the Tyke,

with the salmon Jim and his Indians were able to catch during the time they were at home.

Katchewan had mastered sufficient navigation to be able to serve as Jim's mate, and the arrangement worked in a satisfactory manner, though the native women declared his squaw to be so uplifted in mind by her husband's promotion that really there was no living with her.

But the Tyke was just as ragged and just as small as on the day when he sighted the coming of the schooner with Mrs. Neal and her baby on board. What he lacked in size, however, he made up in sharpness, and Maudie found him an assistant by no means to be despised.

The deep-sea fishing was over for the season, and they had settled down to the usual winter monotony of rain and fog, with fewer fish and more trouble in getting them. These drawbacks had their compensation in the long delightful evenings spent around the big central fire in the family sitting-room, when books, needlework, and music made home the very pleasantest place in the whole wide world.

Maudie and the Tyke had been up the Inlet one wild wet day, fishing for rock-oysters, crabs, and sea-egg, returning at dusk wet, cold, and tired; but the haul had been a good one, and Maudie never deemed it worth while to grumble over the discomforts of daily life, which were past the power of human aid to alter. Besides, the take had been unusually good for

that kind of fishing, and so from a commercial point of view the wet day had been eminently satisfactory.

Jim, who had been shooting geese with Paul and Katchewan in the low cover of the berry-bushes, came to meet her as she landed from her boat.

"I have had some news to-day, Maudie, of a sort," he said slowly, standing back and watching, whilst the shrill-voiced squaws made short work of unloading the boat.

"Of what kind, good or bad?" she asked quickly, bringing her attention momentarily from the boat to bear upon her brother.

"That remains to be proved," he answered, in the same slow tone. "But Cayloot, that old chief from the Quamichan country, came to see Hooee, and to beg tobacco from me, to-day. He said he was trailing down from Cape Mudge."

"Rather out of his way, wasn't it?" asked Maudie, as she rapidly ticked off on her fingers the buckets of fish taken from the boat.

"You can never tell which way an Indian will or will not go when he is on the trail. But Cayloot says a boat has come ashore at Cape Mudge, wrecked in that gale we had from the north-east three weeks back, and a lot of the survivors were men from the Klondyke, coming home with their gold."

"Well?" There was a sharpened strain in her voice as she put her query, and she let three full buckets pass her uncounted.

"I've got the feeling that some of those survivors may bring us news of Basil, and if none of them have reached as far as Victoria, I may take a trip by rail to Nanaimo, to see if I can hear anything about them," he said.

"Do, Jim. I am beginning to feel that I would rather hear that Basil was dead than that he had wilfully neglected to let us hear from him for so long," she answered sadly, adding with a shake of her head, "I have never been so bravely patient as you, and I am afraid I never shall be."

"You keep a brighter face about it, anyway," he said with a sober smile. "But come indoors, Maudie, and get your wet things off; you must be soaked, by the look of you."

"I am damp," she replied with a laugh, turning away towards the house, after a final order to the Tyke. "Did you have a good bag, Jim?"

"Splendid. Paul came first with nine brace, I had eight, and Katchewan five. We had to make two journeys to get them home. Geese are very plentiful this season, and it is easier to get near them on a pouring wet day like this; they don't seem to hear so well when they are feeding."

"What a fine lading you will have to-morrow! I suppose you will slip out of the Inlet by the noon tide?" she said, pausing in the back porch to wring some of the superfluous water from her heavy blanket skirt.

"Yes; and don't be worried if I'm a day or two later than usual in coming back. It may make all that difference to me if I have to go up to Nanaimo."

"Are you going to say anything indoors?" she asked, dropping her voice and nodding in the direction of the closed door behind her.

"No; I hate to raise hopes which may come to nothing, and to hear of Basil is most likely to hear of Charley Neal too. So least said, soonest mended," he answered in a decided tone, and Maudie nodded again in acquiescence; then, as there seemed no more water to be wrung out of her skirt, she opened the door and entered the house.

What a change it was from the wet, dismal world outside, to enter the big sitting-room, with its blazing, crackling fire of spruce boughs, whilst from the cooking-stove in the kitchen beyond came savoury odours of roast-goose and other good fare to heighten the comforting contrast!

"Maudie, my dear child, how wet you are!" exclaimed Mrs. Neal, coming from a final basting of the afore-mentioned goose. "But your dry clothes and your bath are all ready for you, and supper will be on in ten minutes."

"And I also shall be on in ten minutes," rejoined Maudie with a laugh, disappearing in the direction of her own chamber.

Hooee came in before her toilet was completed, and sidled up to her in a secretive, mysterious fashion.

"Look, see dis yere ting, Missi Maudie. Ole man Cayloot gib it me to steal him a big pinch o' tea when Missi Neal not looking. I know it a'most d'reckly I set eyes on it, but I don't not dare to go tell Boss Jim."

Maudie took the article, which Hooee had stuffed into her hand, and held it up in the light of the lamp for inspection, whilst she prepared to give the dusky handmaiden a lecture on the sinfulness of stealing pinches of tea.

But the moral platitudes died on her lips, for she recognized the bent and battered thing in her hand to be an old brass tobacco-box, beloved of Basil, and with his initials, B. B., scratched with the point of a penknife upon the lid.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN THE WASH OF THE EBB

IT was the next morning before Maudie found an opportunity of showing the old battered tobacco-box to Jim, and then he was so profoundly moved by the sight that she was tempted to wish she had kept her discovery to herself.

"Basil must have been on board that vessel which Cayloot told me had gone ashore at Cape Mudge, and if he wasn't among the survivors, he must have—" faltered Jim, whose rough, brown hand trembled visibly as it closed over the battered bit of brass.

"I wouldn't believe the worst before I was compelled to; there is no harm in hoping so long as hoping is possible," she broke in quickly, sorry for the pain she was giving him, and marvelling in her heart that he should still love Basil so dearly, in spite of the long silence of the absent brother.

"If I can't get news one way or the other in Victoria, I'll certainly go on to Nanaimo, and perhaps to Cape Mudge, though that would depend on my being able to get back within a week or ten days. It wouldn't do to be away longer just now, when geese are so plentiful, as well as fish."

"No, indeed," rejoined Maudie thoughtfully. "How many geese do you carry to-day, Jim?"

"Three hundred. I never had such a cargo before. If we have many weeks as good as this, we will see if we can't pick up a steam-tug cheap before another year is out. It would make a mighty saving in time on the voyages to the town, and the old schooner has about seen its best days."

"Tugs are such horridly ungraceful things!" objected Maudie with a pout, thereby betraying a hint of feminine impracticability by no means usual with her. "The schooner dips, and bows, and curtsies as she comes in to the harbour, just like a fine lady entering a ballroom, but a tug rushes ahead without any poetry of motion whatever."

"Folks don't as a rule look for poetry of motion in a fish-boat—at least, not that I've ever heard of. Now about these rock-oysters, Maudie. How many tubs of them should there be? I can't find them entered anywhere on my list." And Jim pulled out a bulky pocket-book, in order to take a final look through his table of cargo.

"They are not entered, the number was not made up until this morning. I thought there would have been but a dozen tubs; we made such a good haul yesterday, however, that the dozen has mounted up to fifteen."

"So much the better," retorted Jim, scribbling rapidly with a stubbly bit of pencil. "Do you want

anything from the town, Maudie? I've got the housekeeping orders, and a list of books from the library, and Paul wants a dozen bright-coloured text-cards for his Sunday-school; but there is nothing down here for you." And he read through his list again, ticking each item off with the stubbly pencil.

"I want so many things that I don't know where to begin," she said with a laugh, which even to her own ears sounded forced. "But, provided you bring plenty of books, Jim, I shall be so content that I shall forget every other want. Barring food and drink, there is nothing on earth so satisfying as a good book. I don't like short, scrappy little bits of stories and incidents, that are no sooner begun than you are at the end of them, but a good big story or history that takes one into a new world for a week at a stretch."

"All right! you shall have it; and if none of the library books look extra big and thick, I'll step into a book-store and bring you the biggest and thickest volume I can find. It doesn't matter what it's about, I suppose?"

"Not in the least. Do you remember that book on budding roses which you brought about a month back? I was simply fascinated, though I don't suppose I shall ever grow roses, or even see the different varieties mentioned there, but I felt as if I were some other person all the time I was reading the book, and I could smell the roses on every page."

"You are a funny girl, and no mistake," Jim said

with a laugh, replacing the book in an inner pocket and carefully buttoning his jacket. "But I must hurry, Maudie, for the tide won't wait for me if I'm not ready for it."

"You will be largely independent of tides when you get your prosaic old steam-tug," she replied with a laugh, and then went aboard the schooner with him, going through various items of cargo with as much promptness and business-like decision as if she had been a man.

The work was not complete when the tide served, so, trailing her boat by a long rope from the stern, she went down the Inlet with her brother, and only parted from him when the open ocean was reached.

Then she went over the side, slipping down the rope into her boat, and calling out a laughing reminder to Jim to be sure not to forget the big thick book which she so ardently desired.

"You may be sure I'll not forget," he shouted back. "Why, I'd bring you the whole town if I could, and if I thought you would be any the happier for it."

Maudie smiled, and waved her hand in reply. But when, by dint of much ducking and curtsying, the schooner had made so much way as to leave the boat looking like a black speck at the mouth of the Inlet, Maudie's mood changed swiftly—the smile gave place to quivering pain, and she wept bitterly, with no spectators of her grief saving a hooded penguin, which

had been catching fish in the little pools left by the outgoing tide, and was now preening its feathers in the pale rays of the wintry sun.

"There, I ought to feel better after that! It must be a clear three months since I cried last," she said briskly to herself, when the shower of tears was past and she was able to smile again.

But the smiles had a watery gleam in sympathy with the sunshine, and Maudie's thoughts were not of the most cheerful complexion as she rowed back up the Inlet, and prepared to take up the business of her daily life once more.

The old unrest was upon her again to-day, as it had been so many times before during the past two years, and all the bitterness of those weeks of Jim's convalescence had come back to haunt her, as in those days when she had waited and watched for a sign or token from Tom Everson, which had never come.

It was well she had pride enough to help her bear the mortification of his silence, for from the moment when, at Mrs. Gibson's reception, she had signed to him to leave her alone with Captain Clark, she had not seen Tom Everson or heard a word about him.

Not that this mattered in the least, so she told herself, clenching her hands so tightly on the paddle that they ached for hours afterwards. Still, it was horribly unpleasant to endure, and she would rather remain on the Inlet until she was old and gray-haired than face

the ordeal of meeting him again, unless of his own free-will he came to seek her.

She was dull and quiet for a day or two after that storm of weeping, but as she took good care to be away in her boat most of the time, no one noticed her gloom, or thought it to be other than business abstraction.

Wild storms were raging every day or so, but the household on the Inlet had not begun to worry on Jim's account, because Maudie had said he would be later in returning this time, and that even a week might elapse before they saw him again.

Meanwhile the daily routine went on with unvarying monotony, Mrs. Neal bustling to and fro in the home her hands had made so cheery, laughing and playing with little Ron, and feeling more light-hearted and happy than for a long time past; while Paul attended to his cows, and stalked geese between whiles, no other work calling for immediate attention, whilst the market value of geese was by no means to be despised. Maudie came and went in her usual manner, and no one thought or dreamed of the black cloud of disaster which loomed so near.

Jim had been away six days, when Maudie, finding the household supplies of oil were running low, determined on taking the big boat and going along the coast to Shoal Cove, where an unfailing supply of dog-fish were to be found.

Anchovies also abounded in the same place, and she

would probably get a day's haul of fish, which would amply repay her the toil and trouble of the longer journey to the fishing-ground.

Starting directly the late dawn broke, with the Tyke for a companion and helper, and a handful of hard sea-biscuit for her mid-day meal—the Tyke preferred raw fish, which he devoured with great gusto—Maudie paddled down the Inlet, then, turning to the south, crept along the rocky, broken coast for four or five miles to the tiny opening called Shoal Cove, which next to the Inlet itself was the best fishing-ground along that coast.

The morning was fine and quiet, but the storm of the previous day had left the waves rolling mountains high, and it was only by dint of keeping their boat close inshore that Maudie and the Tyke could get their rather unwieldly craft along.

But the tide was running out, which helped a little, and as the day grew older the violence of the sea would probably moderate. Besides, it was a case of nothing venture nothing have, and Maudie was not the kind of individual to be daunted by hard work or difficulty in any project which she had set her hand to.

It had been an unusually high tide, and the water had flooded many pools usually left dry. Fish was abundant too, and for a couple of hours after their arrival in the cove, Maudie and her Indian helper fished with unflagging zeal and energy.

Then the Tyke, whose sharp eyes were always roaming here and there in search of amusement or information, suddenly yelled out, "Wreckage, wreckage, Missi Maudie! Look! See!"

"I shall look-see-you with a paddle about your back, if you startle me so badly again, Tyke!" Maudie retorted severely, as she landed a wriggling dog-fish in the boat and gave it a thump by way of quietus.

"There's bin a wreck," snuffled the boy, looking as if he believed the threat to be no idle form of words, "an' de tide am floated in de bits o' de ship."

Maudie shivered violently. The mere mention of a wreck always upset her nerves, but a single glance at the upper end of the cove was sufficient to show her that her companion was right, for the strip of pebbly beach was strewn with bits of board, fragments of broken barrels, and other sea-lumber.

Dropping her hook and line Maudie seized her paddle, motioning the Tyke to do the same, and made for the upper end of the cove as fast as she could go.

Some fear was clutching at her heart—a dread and horror more terrible than anything she had ever known before.

The pools were full of the wash of the ebbing tide, and in these lay many bits of board which had escaped the suck and draw of the receding waters.

Suddenly something printed on one of these floating fragments caught her eye, and, scrambling out of the boat, she waded to reach it.

A low moan of despair came from her white lips then, for there, plain to be read, in big yellow letters on a black ground, she saw "BELLOC BROTHERS", and knew it for a fragment of the schooner.

CHAPTER XXV

TOLD IN PASSING

GAMBLING riots were of such common occurrence in Victoria and Esquimault that no one except the police ever paid much heed to them, unless indeed a man was dangerously wounded, or perhaps killed in the mêlée.

So that when Tom Everson came rushing into Mr. Gibson's shipping office one stormy wet morning, and, panting with excitement, told how Thorpe Tilney had been dangerously wounded in a scrimmage with a Chinaman, and that the Chinaman was dead, Mr. Gibson merely looked up in calm surprise, saying quietly, "There is nothing to go into hysterics about over that, so far as I can see. Tilney has not been such a bright and shining light that the world will be left much the darker by his going out."

"It isn't that," panted Tom; "but he says he will not go easy until he has confessed to something that was done a goodish while back. It has to do with that bother about Preece Morgan."

"You don't say so?" exclaimed Mr. Gibson, bouncing up from his chair like an india-rubber ball, and suddenly becoming as excited as the other.

"Yes, I do, and he wants you to hear it. He can't live more than an hour or two, so the doctor says, which means there is not much time to lose. What are you looking for—your hat? Don't stop for it; I've got an umbrella, so a hat won't matter."

"But I say it will, I don't want to catch my death of cold; and there is no sense in having two funerals where one will suffice," Mr. Gibson replied testily. Then, finding his hat, he put it on his head, and the two went forth.

"Walk faster, do!" implored Tom. "The poor fellow is desperately bad, and it would be dreadful to be too late."

"How much faster do you expect me to go, seeing that I am neither a buffalo nor a railway train?" demanded Mr. Gibson more testily still, for he was growing stout, and the pace was beginning to tell upon him. Then he broke out in a tone of great irritation not unmixed with anxiety, "And how comes it that you are mixed up in a gambling brawl, I should like to know? I thought you kept yourself a bit straighter than that."

"So I do!" flamed out the young man in sudden righteous wrath. "What do you take me for, I wonder, Mr. Gibson, that you should even suggest I am made that way? I was passing down the street as you might have been, when I saw Thorpe Tilney and the Chinkie firing at each other on the door-step."

"I beg your pardon, Tom," said the little shipping

agent meekly; then he burst out in a hot tirade against the civilization, or the want of it, which permitted men to shoot each other in the streets with no more compunction than if they were brute beasts.

"Never mind talking now, there will be time for that later on," Tom Everson answered, and then the scene of the tragedy, a low restaurant in the worst part of the town, having been reached, the two men entered by the swing-door, and were immediately in the presence of death in its most awful form.

The body of the Chinaman lay on a bench covered with a coat, whilst on another bench not many yards distant Thorpe Tilney was stretched out, breathing with difficulty.

The doctor, who was stooping over him, lifted his head at the entrance of the two friends, and beckoned them forward.

"You had better say what you feel is necessary as quickly as possible," he said to the injured man in a meaning tone, then fell back a step to let the police superintendent come nearer, whilst Tom Everson and Mr. Gibson took up a position on the other side.

"It isn't much I want to say, and I don't know that there is much use in my saying it," the dying man whispered with difficulty, "but since it is always possible in this blundering world that the wrong man may suffer, I might as well set the muddle straight before I go."

"Yes indeed, it is the very best that you can do,"

muttered the police superintendent with a baffled air of resignation, for it was exasperating to him to have a shooting affair like this taking place in public, and be obliged to stand impotently on one side and see the offenders slip out of his grasp.

Thorpe Tilney smiled, for he knew the superintendent, and guessed how he must be feeling.

"When Preece Morgan was found battered and bruised, his property stolen, and himself too far gone with that paralytic stroke to be able to give any information, suspicion pointed immediately towards young Basil Belloc, because that old muddler, Captain Clark, declared he had seen him leaving the hut at a questionable hour and in a questionable manner. The fact of young Belloc disappearing just then gave colour to the supposition, and no one was shrewd enough to even suspect it was a case of mistaken identity, saving that girl, Basil's sister, who suggested to Captain Clark that he might in the darkness have mistaken me for Basil."

"Maudie did?" burst from Tom Everson, whilst his face grew pale, his hands shook, and from his eyes there gleamed an angry fire.

Thorpe Tilney smiled again. "Yes, Maudie did, and as I happened along the moment after she had hit the right nail on the head, naturally enough the old captain called upon me there and then to account for myself on that particular night. How I did it I don't know, but I must have succeeded pretty well,

for I have heard nothing more about the matter, only I made it my immediate business to pay her out for her intrusive sharpness."

"Then it was false, what you told me that night as we walked home from the party through the snow?" roared Tom Everson, stooping over the injured man and glaring at him, as if he would have shaken the truth out of him at all costs.

But the doctor dragged him back. "Never mind mere personalities, let him clear young Belloc, did I not tell you there was not much time?"

Thus admonished, Tom subsided into agitated silence, whilst the doctor administered a spoonful of restorative to Thorpe Tilney, and urged him to lose no time, if he desired to make things straight before he went.

"Preece Morgan was my uncle," said Thorpe Tilney, smiling no more, but speaking in the hurried manner of one who seeks to get a painful duty ended, "and when I had been a few days in the city I sought him out to ask his aid, reminding him of the many promises he made to forward my career. But I must have gone to him at an unfortunate time, for he met me with reproaches, flung at me every hard and cruel word he could think of, until, stung to frenzy by his treatment, I struck him, and we fought. He was stronger than I, and in better training though he was an old man, and I had as much as I could do to act on the defensive. Then his rage seemed to choke

him, and he fell forward in a fit. I did what I could for him, loosened his neck-cloth, put a pillow under his head, and all that sort of thing, but I dared not give an alarm, because we were both so bruised and battered by the scrimmage as to have at once betrayed our recent struggle. Being desperately hard up, I laid hands on everything in the shape of money which I could find; but it was not much, for the old man seemed to have been pretty well cleaned out of ready cash, which doubtless made him so ill-tempered. Some securities which I took I had to burn through fear of detection. And that I think is about all I have to say, gentlemen—"

He stopped suddenly, a shiver going through him, whilst his eyes became unnaturally brilliant and wide open. A young clergyman who had entered and made one of the group round the dying man, now came forward to administer such consolations of religion as were possible, whilst Mr. Gibson dragged Tom Everson away out of the reeking, crowded room, and into the purer air of the wet and windy street.

"The false-hearted—" began the young man, his throbbing indignation overmastering every other sensation.

"You'll have to forgive him, Tom, for remember he's a dying man, and we've got to die ourselves some day," broke in the shipping agent solemnly, cutting short the angry accusation of the other.

"That is not so easy, I can tell you," replied Tom

fiercely. "Do you know what he did two years ago? He told me that he and Maudie Belloc were secretly engaged to be married, had been, in fact, ever since he, Thorpe Tilney, stayed at the Inlet that month when Jim was too bad to work the schooner to and fro. He said they were forced to keep it quiet because Jim did not approve, and would not hear of Maudie being married or even engaged whilst she was so young."

"Quite right too. I always said Jim Belloc had a wise head as well as a good heart. But I wonder at Maudie ever giving a thought to a man like Thorpe Tilney," Mr. Gibson remarked, with a dubious shake of his head.

"She did not, I'm sure of it!" burst out Tom more fiercely than before. "Did you not hear him say he made up his mind to spite her for having suggested to Captain Clark where the real offender might be found? That was the very night he told me this precious story of his engagement to Maudie."

"Still, I fail to see how that could make any difference to her, since it is one thing to set about a rumour of that sort, and quite another to prove it," said Mr. Gibson, who could be extremely obtuse sometimes.

"It did make a difference, though, to me, if not to her," Tom replied doggedly. "She knew, and you must have seen, unless indeed you were stone-blind, that I was ready to lie in the mud for her to walk over dry-shod if she chose, and yet from that day to this I have never seen her face, and scarcely heard

her name, all because of that fellow coming between us."

"All because of your own hot-headed obstinacy, you mean," rejoined Mr. Gibson sarcastically, looking as shrewd and wide-awake now as he had previously appeared dull and obtuse. "Why, if you cared for the girl, didn't you go and ask her if it was true, instead of believing the first bit of falsehood anyone chose to tell you? But there, you young men are all alike, so proud and so touchy, and with your heads carried so high in the air, that a taking down once in a while is rather good for you than otherwise, and I can't honestly say that I am sorry for you."

CHAPTER XXVI

A CHANGE OF PLAN

ON reaching Victoria, Jim Belloc first turned his attention to the disposal of his cargo, and having seen all responsibility of that sort transferred to the hands of his agent, who would also collect the stores required to be taken back on the schooner, he left his vessel in charge of Katchewan, and set about his task of looking for tidings of his brother.

The best place in which to hear news of any kind was Gibson's office, as he knew well. Accordingly his first move was in that direction. As he went he resolved to make a confidant of the shipping agent, and ask his advice as to the best method of setting to work to get tidings of the survivors from the wreck off Cape Mudge.

When he reached the office, however, Mr. Gibson was not in. He had been fetched in a hurry, so the clerk said, but would probably be back soon, as he had left no orders behind him.

Jim decided to wait, on the chance of Mr. Gibson returning soon.

The warmth of the office fire soon made him drowsy, he having been at the wheel through a great part of

the previous night, and he quickly fell asleep, leaning back in his chair with his head against the side of the mantel-piece.

Two voices in rather raised argument roused him presently, and he opened his eyes, starting to his feet in a great hurry when he saw that Mr. Gibson and Tom Everson were in the room, though so absorbed were they both in the discussion of some topic of unusal interest, that neither of them had noticed the presence of Jim.

"The very man of all others I've been wanting to see!" exclaimed Mr. Gibson with great cordiality, on turning and discovering his visitor, but Tom Everson suddenly got red in the face, looking so confused and ill at ease as to make Jim wonder what could be the matter with him.

"It is fortunate I happened along, then. Is it anything important, Mr. Gibson?" Then something in the other's face struck him, and he added hurriedly, "Anything about Basil?"

"Yes, that is just what it is, and good news too," rejoined the shipping agent. "Basil is clear now from the faintest suspicion of having had a hand in that muddle about Preece Morgan, seeing that the man who was concerned has confessed;" and then he plunged into the story of the scene from which he and Tom had just come, relating how Thorpe Tilney had eased his conscience in dying, of the load which had lain there so long.

Jim stood listening with a bewildered look on his face, and when Mr. Gibson had done, he remarked with an air of surprised conviction, "So Maudie was right after all in her mistrust of that man. She always said he was no good, though she admitted he reminded her of Basil in face and figure too."

"Miss Maudie had more reason to dislike him than she knew or guessed of," replied Mr. Gibson, bringing his fist down upon the office table with an unexpected thump which made Jim start. "Here, Tom, now is a chance for you to put matters straight a bit so far as the young woman is concerned, and if you are wise you will speak up like a man and say what it is you want, and why you've been such a precious long time in asking for it."

As he spoke, Mr. Gibson rubbed his hands together with an air of great enjoyment, then stood with his back to the fire beaming upon the two young men with an aspect of radiant benevolence.

But Tom apparently did not find it so easy to put the tangle straight, and explain what it was that he desired to have, and in the end it was Jim who came to the rescue and helped him out of his difficulty.

"I suppose you want me to tell Maudie about this confession of Thorpe Tilney's, so that she may understand why it was you turned your back on the lot of us," he said, with a simple dignity not unmixed with reproach.

"When a man has acted about as foolishly as it is possible for a man to act, even in this world of silly things, he needs a friend to help him out of the muddle. And in this case without your assistance I'm afraid I shall fare badly indeed," Tom replied, with a very unusual humility, but devoutly wishing at the same time that Mr. Gibson would find some better occupation than standing before the fire with that amiable but exasperating smile upon his face.

"I will tell her when I go back, but that won't be just yet, because I'm going to hunt for Basil first, or at least for news of him," Jim said, then showed the battered brass tobacco-box, telling the two men how it had come into his possession, and his strong impression that the survivors from the vessel wrecked off Cape Mudge would be able to give him some news of his brother.

"They'll give you news fast enough if you pay them for it, only the trouble is that it won't be worth having when you've got it. But that's always the way in this wicked world," Mr. Gibson said, shaking his head in a doleful fashion.

"Look here!" broke in Tom Everson with sudden energy. "Our superintendent of works was saying only this morning that he must send a steam-packet with supplies to the dredgers in Seymour Strait. I will ask him to let me go on the packet and make all the enquiries for you, if you will go straight back to the Inlet and tell Maudie of Thorpe Tilney's confession.

Say you consent, there's a good fellow, then you will lay me under no end of obligation."

Jim took his time in answering. Deliberate in all he did, the present crisis appeared to him to call for even more meditation than usual before a decision could be arrived at. Then too, he was being dragged two ways at once. Affection for Basil prompted him to set out at once in search of the missing brother, who had been so wonderfully cleared from suspicion that day. But on the other hand there was Maudie to be thought of, and Jim, who was as wise as he was silent, had a shrewd suspicion that the truth as told by Thorpe Tilney in passing, might make a great difference to his proud young stepsister.

"Well?" queried Tom impatiently, when the deliberations of the other had extended into some minutes, and Mr. Gibson continued to smile, just as if his face had become petrified into that expression.

"I will go home, I think, and leave Basil to you for the present. Only, after I've been back to the Inlet, and said what there is to say, what then?" Jim asked slowly, determined to have things put on an understandable basis once and for all.

Tom turned his back upon Mr. Gibson and the smile which was so exasperating.

"That depends upon Maudie herself," he replied. "It is a big score she has against me, and if she refuses to let it be wiped out it is useless for me to complain, seeing that she has reason and justice on

her side. But if she is generous enough to forgive me—well, I'll hope to have you for a brother-in-law at no very distant date."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed the irrepressible Mr. Gibson, with a caper that nearly toppled him into the fire.

But honest Jim's eyes had suddenly grown misty. To him Maudie seemed but a child still, and the bare prospect of losing her was a wrench.

CHAPTER XXVII

A HOUSE OF MOURNING

THERE was no more thought of fish or fishing for Maudie that day, although huge dog-fish were rising to the top of the water, or darting hither and thither in the shallows, and anchovies were present in shoals.

When the first burst of her grief was over, with the help of the Tyke she collected such fragments of the wreck as could be stowed into the boat, and then set out on the toilsome return journey to the Inlet, only now there was the added burden of her grief to weigh her down and make the work of rowing more laborious still.

Nor was the Tyke in a much more cheerful frame of mind. If Boss Jim was drowned, naturally the four men and a boy who worked the schooner with him had gone down too. And these men were his near kin, the only friends he possessed in the world, since among his people the affection of female relatives counted for nothing at all.

To add to their difficulties the tide had turned, and was rolling in with great force—indeed, there were moments during that perilous voyage when Maudie

faced the possibility of their being swamped and drowned, without a chance to save themselves. She made the Tyke keep the head of the boat as close inshore as she dared, although it was fearfully risky work, since at any moment an extra big wave might have dashed the frail craft on the bristling rocks of that unfriendly shore.

But in spite of dangers they made the Inlet in safety, though not a moment too soon, for the breeze of the morning was fast freshening to a gale, whilst overhead thick gray clouds were scudding before the wind, and promising a heavy downpour shortly.

Maudie had time to think again when the quieter waters of the Inlet were reached. Her great trouble was how she might best break the news to Paul. Unless he chanced to be near the landing-stage when she reached home, she could not hope for a chance of telling him quietly before the Indian women made the solitary Inlet ring with the noise of their loud lamenting, for the Tyke was certain to announce the catastrophe the moment he set foot on shore, no matter how faithfully he might have pledged himself to silence whilst in the boat with her.

She was still revolving the question as they reached the harbour-pool, when a sudden shout from the landing-stage announced the presence of Paul, and set her heart at rest concerning the telling of her heavy tidings.

"I'm glad you have come back so soon, Maudie, for

we are in for some desperately bad weather, or I am much mistaken. The barometer has been on the fall ever since you started. I only hope Jim won't have the full force of it on his way home from the town. But I say, what is the matter?" he exclaimed, as the boat glided closer in, and he caught sight of his sister's set white face and the piled-up wreckage which they had brought.

Maudie caught her breath in a painful gasp. All the way home from Shoal Cove she had been dreading this task of telling the disastrous news to Paul and Mrs. Neal.

But her brother's perceptions were after all keener than she imagined, and before she had time to spring out of the boat on to dry land, he cried out in a tone of exceedingly bitter pain, "Maudie, Maudie, has anything happened to Jim?"

She was shaking and shivering from head to foot, with the combined results of her heavy fight against the stormy waters and the terrible shock of finding the wreckage in the cove. The words she tried to utter would not come, and she could only wind her strong young arms round the boy's slight figure whilst she sobbed with her head on his shoulder.

But no words were needed, her dry, despairing sobs and the pathetic droop of her figure were quite enough to convince Paul that the disaster, whatever its nature, was so bad that by no possibility could it be worse.

To his own heart he said over again the mournful

plaint he had uttered to Mrs. Neal, "They all go away from me, but none ever come back." But to Maudie he faltered forth in a tone which tried its hardest to be brave, "Don't grieve so, Maudie, we have got each other still, you know!"

"Ah, yes!" she sobbed, "but Jim was Jim, and no one will ever be quite like him. Only, Paul, I don't feel as if I could ever be happy again, because I never appreciated him at his real value."

Paul shivered. "You are quite sure?" he asked. The sea was so uncertain, that in his heart he clung half-unconsciously still to the hope that she might be mistaken.

For answer she stepped back to the boat, which the Tyke had secured by a rope to a post and left, and picking out the bit of wreckage which had the name "Belloc Brothers" painted upon it, "I found it in Shoal Cove, it was floating in the wash of the ebb-tide," she said, holding the dismal relic up for him to see.

"But the boats, Maudie,—wouldn't Jim have taken to them? The schooner's boats were new and good."

She shook her head slowly and dubiously. It hurt her cruelly to quench his hopes, but it had to be done, since she with her wider experience of the sea had no vestige of hope at all.

"If they took to the boats they must have been swamped at once or they would have been home by now. For think of it, Paul, the poor old schooner

must have foundered almost in sight of shore, unless, indeed, that wreckage drifted in from some set of the tides," she said sadly.

"Oh, what is that!" cried Paul, as a long sustained wailing shriek cut through the air, a terrible sound, which once heard is rarely forgotten—the poor Indian women grieving for their dead.

"The Tyke has spread the news already. I was sure he would. Let us go and tell Mrs. Neal, Paul; she will be so frightened when she hears the wailing," Maudie said, shivering again as the shrill, plaintive mourning struck upon her ears.

The door of the back porch was flung open as they approached, and Mrs. Neal, with a startled look on her face, appeared at the threshold.

"Maudie—Paul—what is it?" she cried breathlessly, as another burst of weird wailing sounded from the native huts lying farther round the harbour shore beyond the curing-sheds.

But Paul leaned against the outer wall of the porch, unable to speak a word, so terrible to him was this loss of a brother, who had been to his poor orphan-childhood father and mother also.

"Ella, you will have to be our real sister now, for the schooner is wrecked and Jim is—" But Maudie could get no farther with her direful story, and instead tumbled helplessly into Mrs. Neal's kind arms, and was by her half-dragged, half-carried into the house.

Paul followed, groping his way with his hands against the walls, as if he were blind and afraid of falling. Grief with him was like bodily illness, and as he had little reserve of strength to draw upon, there was small prospect of his holding up against such a deadly blow.

There were very few words spoken by the three during that first hour, only, with an arm round each of them, Ella Neal vowed to herself to stand by Maudie and Paul, a sister indeed, sharing their hardships and their sorrows, as if the tie that bound them was of blood and not alone of love.

It was Maudie who roused first from the stupefying lethargy of sorrow, and began to talk of what would have to be in the days of the cheerless, dreary future.

"I can still keep the home going, I think, if I can arrange with the Alberni mail-boat to call every week and take my fish to Victoria, only for that I shall have to go to the town myself, and just at present I don't see how I am to get there," she said, sitting erect and looking straight before her, with her tears drying fast and her bearing full of strong purpose and resolution. Henceforth upon her would devolve the responsibility of keeping the home together, and she meant to do it to the very best of her ability.

"Ron and I shall be no burden on you, dear," began Mrs. Neal; but Maudie turned to her with a quick, agitated movement, crying sharply:

"Oh, you would not leave us surely! Why, you

are all we have left now, Ella; neither Paul nor I can do without you."

"No, indeed, I will not leave you. I only meant that I could earn enough to keep myself from being a burden, or the child either, for I can work with the women in the curing-sheds, and that will relieve you of at least one responsibility, whilst Paul's little farm will keep us in most of our food," Mrs. Neal answered, striving to speak cheerily, yet feeling the blackest depression at heart that she had ever known.

"We shall manage to get on, I don't doubt. But it is so awful to think of those brave fellows, Jim and his Indians, drowned as it were within sight of home. I think I could have borne it better if he had died here in his bed. Hark to those women wailing, Ella! I feel as if I should like to go out among them and shriek too. It would make it easier to bear if one could cry aloud as they are doing," Maudie said, standing erect, and flinging up her arms with a wild hysterical impulse.

But Mrs. Neal drew her down to the settle again. "Cry here if you can, Maudie, it will do you good, and then perhaps you will feel braver to bear up under the sorrow."

"Will the bodies drift in, do you think?" Paul asked, speaking for the first time since he had entered the house, but in a voice so thick and hoarse as to be almost unrecognizable.

Maudie shuddered. "I am afraid not, but I shall

go out the first thing to-morrow morning to see if I can find any trace of remains; that is, if the wind is down a little, but it is blowing a gale now, indeed it was all the Tyke and I could do to bring the boat back from Shoal Cove without accident."

"Don't go, Maudie, if there is risk," pleaded the poor boy, leaning across Mrs. Neal and slipping an imploring hand in his sister's, "for you are all that is left now!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN SEARCH OF TIDINGS

WHEN morning came a wild snow-storm was raging, and the air was so full of a white smother that even the water in the harbour-pool was invisible from the windows of the house.

Plainly any search for drifted remains was entirely out of question, for in addition to the blinding, whirling snowfall a fierce tempest was raging, the thunder of the breakers on the shore being plainly audible in the house, even with closed windows and doors, whilst the snapping of branches and tree-stems in the forest was like the discharge of musketry.

Such storms were very unusual in the sheltered districts round the Inlet. Paul could not remember one so severe, whilst Maudie had only a dim memory of such a day when she was a very little child.

No outdoor work was possible, saving that Paul contrived to grope his way to the shed where the cows were sheltered, milking and feeding them, both in the morning and the evening.

To Maudie the imprisonment in the house was almost too painful to be borne in the circumstances; although, had there been no trouble, she would have

hailed the enforced inactivity as a legitimate holiday, and set herself to feminine tasks with infinite zest and enjoyment.

As it was, she wanted to be out-of-doors with her misery, with only wind and sea and sky to hear her lament for the brother who had perished in doing his duty.

She was wandering listlessly from room to room, thinking with mournful tenderness of Jim, when suddenly there came into her mind the remembrance of the quest on which he had gone, and which had so long delayed the schooner on its return voyage from Victoria.

Perhaps Jim was bringing news of Basil, some hint of his whereabouts, or tidings of his fate, which would now never be told, unless, indeed, he had confided the story to someone in the town.

The thought roused her from her sorrowful brooding by putting a new idea into her head, which she decided to act upon with the least possible delay, just as soon as the storm ceased its raging.

By way of preparation she rummaged in the loft over the kitchen, and finding her snow-shoes among a lot of other heterogeneous lumber, dragged them out, and set to work on such repairs as were necessary.

"The wind is lessening, Maudie, and it is not snowing nearly so fast now," said Paul, when, in the early twilight, he came in from his second expedition to the cow-shed.

"That means a fine day to-morrow, and with enough snow to make snow-shoeing easy, Paul. I mean to start for Victoria an hour before daybreak to-morrow, if it has left off snowing. I shall take Tyke with me for company, and allowing plenty of time for accidents, with one good rest on the way, I ought to reach the town late in the afternoon. We must get news of when poor, dear Jim started as soon as we can, and besides that, I am by no means sure that there may not be tidings of Basil waiting for us there too."

"But you won't know the way?"

"Yes; I can remember the general trend of the country, and the nearer one gets to Victoria the easier it is because of the farms and villages. Oh! I shall do, never fear," she said confidently, determined to leave no rankling doubt behind which should destroy their peace whilst she was absent.

"But how will you get back, dear?" asked Mrs. Neal, who had come to make a third at the discussion taking place by the kitchen-stove, where Maudie was deftly fitting new thongs of walrus-hide on to the snow-shoes by which she was to travel to the town.

"I have been thinking of that, Ella, and the journey back should be as easy as the journey to the town, if only the snow lies long enough. I shall need one clear day to rest and to make enquiries, coming back the day after if the travelling is still good. But if a

thaw sets in, why, I must of course wait for the Alberni boat, which may be days late, so don't worry more than you can help."

"It is a dreadful journey for a girl alone," Mrs. Neal answered with a shiver.

"I shall not be quite alone, for the Tyke will be with me; there is no fear of any kind about the treatment I shall receive from any Indians I may chance to meet, and it is not the weather for white rogues to be disporting in the open," she said, with a touch of scorn, then seeing how troubled Mrs. Neal still looked, stopped fixing the leathern thong to bestow on her an affectionate caress. "Dear Ella, don't worry about me. It is certain someone must get through to the town as soon as possible, so that this snow coming just now is like Divine Providence intervening on our behalf. And there is no one else who knows the way, or could hope to do the journey so easily."

"Let me come with you instead of Tyke; do, Maudie! I can walk quite easily on snow-shoes!" pleaded Paul, with such an imploring look in his eyes that she found it hard work to resist the appeal, even though reason and common sense alike told her how impossible it would be for him to stand the strain of the journey.

"Paul, dear, it is not to be thought of. Think how cruel it would be to leave Ella here alone. Besides, what should I do with you if you broke down on the way?" she said hurriedly, fearful lest she should be

over-persuaded into taking him against her own judgment.

"Maudie is quite right, it would not do for you to think of making the attempt," broke in Mrs. Neal's voice, almost sharply, so well did she know the limits of Paul's strength, and how nearly the point of break-down had been reached owing to the shock of yesterday.

Maudie gave her a warm smile of gratitude. No one had ever managed Paul so well as Mrs. Neal, and Dr. Ramsay had said two years ago, when he came to see Jim, that with care the weakly boy might grow into a strong man yet, especially if he incurred no bad illness or heavy strain before he was twenty.

"I am going to whistle for the Tyke," she said, stepping out of the kitchen on to the back porch. There, lifting a small cane whistle which was suspended by a string from her waist-belt, she blew a shrill and thrice-repeated blast upon it.

"He will never be able to find his way here through this smother. Why, it is coming down faster than ever!" said Paul, coming out to stand by her side, and peering into the whirling white cloud which shut down round them like a fleecy curtain.

"I think he will come. Hark! that was his whistle. We shall see him in five minutes or so. How cold it is growing, Paul! That is a sign that the snow has almost done falling. If it only freezes all night, travelling will be easy when morning comes," she

said, peering into the white gloom for some sign of the Tyke's approach, and shivering at the keenness of the air.

"Here he comes!" exclaimed Paul, pointing to a moving speck which bobbed and floundered through the billowy drifts which lay piled into fantastic shapes between the house and the shore.

Maudie watched his coming in silence, and waited until the Tyke, clad in the dirtiest of red blankets, stood before her, stamping and shaking to brush the snow from his blanket draperies.

"Tyke, I must go to the town to-morrow if the snow stops falling. Would you like to go with me to see the stores, and the horses, the long lines of houses called streets, and all the other wonderful things that Katchewan and Kamloo have so often spoken of?" she asked, with the air of one about to confer a favour, knowing well that if she spoke of the journey as a piece of work to be done, he would find some means of evading the task.

"The town!" He got no farther in English, but lapsed at once into the spluttering, incoherent gibberish of his tribe, so overcome with delight was he at the prospect of the expedition.

"Very well, I shall expect you to be ready to start by one hour before dawning; and mind that your snow-shoes have new thongs for the journey, for if they break down I shall have to leave you to find your way home as best you can," she replied, in a

tone which plainly implied that she meant what she said.

The Tyke drew his breath with a sharp, hissing noise, expressive of intense inward satisfaction, then with another burst of rapturous incoherencies floundered away through the snow-drift once more, in order to get his preparations made for the start.

Despite the brave front she presented to Mrs. Neal and Paul, Maudie's heart failed her not a little at the thought of her journey to the town. It was not the mere trial of endurance involved, but the visit itself which daunted her brave spirit. The people she would meet, and the questioning, affectionate but disconcerting, to which Mrs. Gibson would be certain to subject her, this made her quail. Her former distaste of meeting Tom Everson was upon her in full force, and if she went to Victoria she doubtless would meet him, as she knew full well.

But it was imperative that someone should go, in order to hear the last news of Jim, and to learn if any tidings had been received of Basil. There was also the transit of the fish to be arranged for, and Maudie knew that she must go, even though every prejudice of heart and brain revolted at the prospect.

The natural result of all this secret mental agitation was a sleepless night, and when, two hours before the dawning, Mrs. Neal came to call her, Maudie started from an uneasy doze, feeling unrefreshed, and totally unfit for the demands the day must make upon her.

The snow had ceased falling, it was freezing hard, and the moonlight made it almost as bright as day, when, after a substantial breakfast, Maudie slipped her feet through the newly-fitted thongs of her snow-shoes, and prepared to set forth.

A well-filled wallet strapped to her shoulders contained provisions for the day, and the Tyke when he appeared was provided with a similar supply, to his great satisfaction.

"If the snow holds you may expect to see me by sundown the day after to-morrow, but if a thaw sets in, why, it is of no use expecting me until I come," she reiterated cheerfully, standing on the back porch and casting one last look at the warm and bright interior of the home she was leaving. Then, with a last word of farewell she glided away on the wide, ungainly shoes, which are such swift and easy travellers when worn by those who knew how to use them.

When the tree-belt was left behind, and the open country lay spread before her in an unvarying plain of dazzling whiteness, Maudie went forward at a great pace, the Tyke keeping well up with her, and, as usual, beguiling the tedium of the way with his accustomed hissing whistle.

By mid-day she called a halt for half an hour, sitting down with her back to a solitary maple, the only tree of any size to be seen in the monotonous level landscape, although a scrub of berry-bushes, from two to

four feet high, presented serious obstacles to rapid progress. Maudie had taken a bee-line through it, because it stretched in a seemingly endless belt across the plain, and it would be poor economy to skirt it for miles, only to be compelled to cross it in the end.

She did not remember a similar experience on her previous journey, and this fact disturbed her not a little. She had steered her way so far by means of a pocket-compass, and knew that, at the rate she had travelled, the town should be at no great distance; by this time, too, farms and villages should be dotted here and there along her path.

But not a trace of human habitation was to be seen anywhere, whilst no column of smoke in any direction betokened the near neighbourhood of an Indian encampment even, to which she might apply for information and advice about her journey.

At the end of half an hour she rose to resume her journey with a feeling akin to panic in her breast, whilst even the Tyke's ardour seemed to have undergone some diminution, and his whistle had dropped to a subdued droning noise, which sounded like a moan.

Maudie was growing tired; she had scarcely slept at all in the two nights since the discovery of the wreck, and the strain of the shock was much greater than she had supposed.

An overpowering desire for sleep was upon her, her sight grew dim, and her sense of hearing became

indistinct. Then she caught herself up on the verge of a doze, and commenced to talk hurriedly to her companion, in order to keep herself awake.

But the Tyke seemed to be oppressed by much the same sensation, for he answered only by inarticulate grunts; and once, to her dismay, she saw him lurch forward and almost fall.

Then suddenly he lifted his head, listening intently.

"What dat noise?" he cried, with so much active terror in his expression that Maudie feared he would turn and flee.

"Tell me what it is like," she said, after straining her ears in the effort to hear.

The Tyke immediately gave vent to a shrieking whistle, followed by much puffing.

"Why, that must be a railway-train! Then where can we be?" she exclaimed, in growing dismay.

But her query received no answer, the puffing and the whistle had roused the Tyke from his creeping lethargy, and he was now so busily employed in imitating and reproducing the sound as to be quite oblivious to everything else.

To make matters worse it began to snow again, not in a few big vagrant flakes, but small and fine, with the promise of a heavier fall behind.

If only there had been some sign of civilization, Maudie felt that she could have plucked up courage and gone forward with a brave heart, though every

limb was aching with exhaustion, and she was hopelessly lost as well.

But right in front of them and barring their way loomed another tree-belt, the Douglas pines rearing their tall heads two hundred feet into the pale gray of the wintry sky, and forming a vast impenetrable barrier with no apparent break for miles on either side.

All this was depressing enough, but worse was impending, and befell quickly, for the Tyke, who had grown drowsy again and was not looking to his feet, slid one end of his snow-shoe under a half-hidden root, and the strain, falling upon a weak place in the framework, caused it to snap in halves, precipitating the wearer with great violence on to the other shoe, which broke also.

CHAPTER XXIX

DUTY FIRST AND WHAT IT BROUGHT

TOM EVERSON went straight from that exciting and somewhat disconcerting interview in Mr. Gibson's office to seek the superintendent of works, and obtain from him the necessary permission to proceed to Cape Mudge without delay.

That important functionary was, however, not to be seen, he having gone to Esquimault on business which would take all day to transact. And as Tom could not leave his own particular department to fly off in pursuit of his chief, he had to wait with what patience he might until the following morning.

When it came it brought another disappointment, in the shape of a hurried command to him from head-quarters to proceed to Nanaimo without delay, on an affair of great urgency, which might hold him closely engaged for three or four days, perhaps more.

It was useless to protest, more especially as he was hoping for promotion at no distant date. Moreover, Nanaimo was on the way to Cape Mudge, and if he set out at once, it might be possible after all to do the trip and be back in Victoria before Jim made the voyage again from the Inlet.

So he prepared for an immediate start, finding time before he left by train to step on board the schooner to say good-bye to Jim, and to tell him of the change of plan made necessary by the orders just received from head-quarters.

"It may come to the same thing in the end; you may even find in Nanaimo the very information which you were going to Cape Mudge to seek," replied Jim with great cheerfulness. "For, now it is possible to ask for news of Basil openly, I've great hopes that we sha'n't have to wait long for tidings concerning him."

"You are on the move too, I see," Tom said as he turned to go, noting the active preparations which were going forward on board.

"Yes, I'm hoping to slip out with the tide. There is some heavy weather in front of us, or I am much mistaken, and I'd like to escape it if possible, for my old boat is none too fit for rough weather," Jim said, casting an anxious eye on the mainmast as he spoke.

"Ah! wants making into a new one, I expect," Tom rejoined, wondering how many times the schooner had done the rough but uneventful voyage between Victoria and the Inlet. "You should try steam, Belloc. Think of the time you would save, and in such a woody country as yours fuel would not be a serious item."

"That is just what I am thinking of doing, and Gibson says he knows where to pick me up a tug

upon reasonable terms, and is going to see about it at once," Jim said in reply.

"Gibson knows everything, or thinks he does," Tom retorted with a sudden irritation, caused by his remembrance of that aggravating smile on the jovial countenance of the shipping agent, which had so annoyed him on the previous day.

Then he hurried away to catch his train, and was soon speeding northward to grimy Nanaimo.

His work in the dirty northern city held him closely for nearly a week, and when it was done he sought in vain for means of starting at once for Cape Mudge; a boat was expected up from Esquimault in about three days, he was told, which would, weather permitting, go straight on to the cape.

Deciding that the wisest course was to wait in Nanaimo until she came, Tom wrote to his chief for the required leave of absence, which obtaining, he set about using to the best possible advantage.

But one must be very keen on holiday-making to find much charm or diversion in a place which is noted only for its shipping and its coal-mines, and as Tom Everson by reason of his occupation at the Victoria docks had already been sated with shipping, the only novelty remaining was the mining, into the working of which he enquired at considerable length during those days of tiresome waiting.

"Want to go down, do you? Well, I don't say but what there are pleasanter ways of spending a holiday;

still, different people have different ideas of what constitutes enjoyment," the manager remarked, as he signed a permit for the young man, and saw him handed over to the care of a big burly miner, whose face was grimed with coal-dust until he was the hue of an African negro.

"What an awful existence!" exclaimed the visitor, when he had been safely landed in the bowels of the earth, and seen the miners swarming to and fro like ants in an ant-hill—black perspiring toilers, whose working days were passed in this gloomy place, where the rays of the sun had never shone.

"Oh! we get used to it, and the pay isn't bad, ninety dollars a month for an eight hours' day; it is easy to go farther and fare worse," his guide answered in a tone of comfortable complacency, he being one of the few miners able to keep money after he had made it, a condition that made him more content than most.

Suddenly a laugh rang out near at hand. Not a mirthful sound by any means, but there was a familiar ring in it which caused Tom to start violently, and then to enquire with ill-repressed agitation into the identity of the owner.

"The man's name is Brown, or that is what he calls himself at least, and one name is as good as another down here," replied the dusky guide.

"Give me a chance to speak to him, will you, a chance alone if you can?" and Tom increased the ninety dollars monthly wage with a substantial tip,

which caused the receiver first to stare in a bewildered fashion, and then to execute a wink of unfathomable meaning, after which he shouted in stentorian tones to the man called Brown, ordering him to show the visitor the new patent ventilator, which regulated the air-supply in number nine working.

"You can do as you please about giving him a tip, you know," the grimy giant said, with a knowing laugh as he passed Tom on to the care of Brown. He had jumped to the conclusion that the visitor was a detective, and that he had recognized in Brown a man who was "wanted" for some wrong-doing.

"Basil!" exclaimed Tom in great amazement, as the light of the safety-lamp illuminated the face of his new guide, which, though grimy and bearded like the others, belonged unmistakably to the long-missing Basil Belloc.

"Tom Everson!" ejaculated the other, starting back, and with no very pleased look on his blackened countenance, which even under its coating of coal-dust was so curiously like Maudie's.

"Yes, yes, but what on earth has made you hide away in this hole, when we all thought of you as hundreds of miles away in Alaska?" demanded Tom impatiently, scenting a mystery and anxious to fathom it.

"I did go to Alaska, and a precious lot of good it did me, as I told Jim when I wrote, just before leaving Juneau," Basil retorted half-sullenly.

"Jim has had no letter from you, never a word since you went away, and the worry of it, combined with the fear lest you were mixed up in that Preece Morgan muddle, nearly killed him two years ago," Tom said severely.

"Well, I was mixed up in it, and am now; that is why I am grubbing down here like a mole instead of living a life above-ground, for ninety dollars a month are not to be despised when you are loaded down with debt as I am."

"But Thorpe Tilney confessed when he was dying that he did it himself," said Tom in surprise, wondering if he were dreaming, or whether Basil was dreaming, or what all this mystery might mean.

"Did what? And, by the way, who is, or was, Thorpe Tilney, and pray what has he to do with my affairs?" demanded Basil.

"It is plain we are talking at cross-purposes. Can't you strike work here and now, and go with me where we can have the business straight out, and clear up the mystery?" Tom demanded impatiently.

Basil threw a glance round at the gloomy cavern in which they were standing, with its whirring ventilating machinery. "I guess this is the most private place I know; we sleep six in a room at the house where I lodge, and you don't get much time to yourself in a place like that," he said with a melancholy smile.

"Come to my hotel, we can talk as long as we like

there. And see here, Basil, if it is going to make it harder for you losing time like this, I'll pay the difference," Tom said earnestly, rattling some odd coins in his pocket with the air of a millionaire.

Basil laughed, only, as before, there was no mirth in the sound. "I'm not so hard up as all that; indeed I've a banking account, only the money is not my own, only in name."

Tom felt more puzzled than ever, but refrained from comment, as they walked to the bottom of the shaft and waited for the cage to take them to the surface.

"How long have you been working here?" he asked, when the upper air was reached and they turned away from the mines in a blinding snow-storm.

"Eleven months. That means I've saved nearly two hundred dollars already by dint of living hard, and another month or two will about make a free man of me if I can put up with it so long," Basil replied with a fierce impatient sigh.

"Look here, begin at the beginning and tell your story first, then when you've done I'll tell mine," Tom said, when they had reached the hotel and were shut up in a private room with a good square meal before them, he having a shrewd belief that at this juncture liberal feeding would do more towards inviting Basil Belloc's confidence than any other thing.

"There isn't much to tell, and it isn't very pleasant hearing either, but such as it is you are welcome to

hear it," Basil rejoined, his manner having already lost some of its gloom, thanks to the influence of succulent beef-steak and savoury sausages with their accompaniment of fragrant coffee.

"Say on," admonished Tom.

"The trouble began the very night when Jim took Charley Neal's wife to the Inlet, and left me in Victoria with Preece Morgan's crowd. I think my head was a bit turned with the thought of the fortune I was going to make on the Klondyke, and I got playing cards for the first time in my life, and, please God, the last too!"

"That's right, mind you stick to it," broke in Tom encouragingly, but Basil went on without heeding the interruption.

"I won at first, but not for long, then I began to lose, and the more I lost the more reckless I became, until before the night was over I had lost every cent of the two hundred dollars advanced me by Jim, and the man who had won it was Preece Morgan. Then when morning came, and the old rascal found he could not get the boat he had bargained for to take his party to Juneau, he just threw up the whole thing and vowed he'd have nothing to do with it. But for the loss of my money, I think I should have put my pride in my pocket then and gone home to the Inlet, only I simply could not face Jim and tell him I had lost all that money at cards, after promising him I would never touch them."

"I should think not," put in Tom quietly, but again Basil went on without heeding him.

"Charley Neal was good to me then, and vowed he'd see me through the muddle. He wrote Preece Morgan a letter in my name, demanding the loan of the money I had lost, and, greatly to the surprise of both of us, he got it too, so I suppose the old rascal must have had a soft spot somewhere. To prevent any more mishaps we cleared out after that, going in a fish-boat to Seattle, and from thence to Juneau. We soon found, when we got there, that we had only about half as much money as we ought to have for the journey up-country; and so, on Neal's suggestion, we started in the provision line in Juneau, catering for new arrivals, and supplying parties starting for the mountains. We did very well at it too, and had saved nearly enough money to start with, when poor Charley pegged out."

"Is Mrs. Neal's husband dead?" cried Tom, bouncing up from his seat in surprise.

"Yes; he took a fever, and went out sudden. The doctor said he had no constitution, and would never have survived the journey to the Klondyke. I wrote and told his wife about it, and sent a letter to old Jim too."

"Which they never had," replied Tom.

"Well, that was not my fault anyhow, seeing I had done what I could in the matter. Business did not prosper so much after Charley died, and in the spring

I sold the connection to a German. I ought to have sent Neal's portion to his widow then, but I didn't, or I should still have been too short of money to get to the Klondyke. Well, I went, but I didn't stay long; to every man that makes a fortune there, I guess fifty go under, whilst the life is beyond description awful. I had only enough money left to reach the coast, and I worked my passage back to Seattle as assistant stoker on board a boat whose crew had nearly all deserted for the diggings. At Seattle I heard of the demand for miners at Nanaimo, and worked my way up here, where I've been ever since. For, having spent Mrs. Neal's money as well as Morgan's loan, it was of no use to think of going home until I had saved something."

"So that was what you meant when you said you had a banking account, only the money was not your own?" asked Tom, who was beginning to comprehend some of the things which had been so mysterious before.

"That is about it, and I guess you'd feel the same," Basil replied, the gloom dropping over his face again, and imparting to it a weary, middle-aged expression.

"I think you ought to work hard and live hard until the money is paid back certainly, but I don't think that you are in the right, giving your friends all this anxiety on your account; why, man, you can have no idea what they have had to endure;" and Tom plunged into a history of all the trouble and

perplexity which had come to Jim and Maudie owing to the mistake of Captain Clark in identifying Thorpe Tilney as Basil, and the damaging evidence of the letter written by Charley Neal in Basil's name.

"It is funny that I should never hear a word about it, and yet I might have been dropped upon any day by the police. Though, by the way, there were not many of them in Alaska, and those that were there had too much to do to be over-fond of meddling in what did not concern them. But I will go home and show myself, then come back here and work till I've paid what I owe, for they sha'n't have it against me that I'm the first Belloc to drag the name through the mire," Basil said, standing erect and looking as if he were going to start off that very moment.

"Look here, old fellow, we'll go together. We will train it to Shawnisht to-night, sleep there, and start at dawn for the Inlet on snow-shoes. I'm used to that sort of travel, or was when I lived in Ottawa."

"Very well, I'll give a look in at my diggings and send a message to the super-of-works, and meet you at the station in half an hour," Basil said, knocking a chair over in his eagerness to be gone, for a sudden home-sickness had seized upon him, and nothing could ease it saving an immediate start.

It was snowing when the train steamed out of the station, but the fall on this day was light and intermittent compared with what had come previously, and the two friends anxiously discussed the prospects

of to-morrow's journey as the train puffed and snorted its way through the encumbering drifts.

Basil had made no attempt to smarten his personal appearance, and was still wearing the clothes in which he had left the mines, with the addition only of a thick old pilot jacket to keep out the bitter cold of the winter day.

It was late in the evening when they reached the station at Shawnisht, which was little better than a siding. Indeed the town itself was no bigger than a village, the scanty population consisting for the most part of wood-cutters, who found occupation in the dense forests of the neighbourhood.

The one hotel of which the place boasted was a timber-and-bark hut of primitive construction, the accommodation it offered being after the same pattern.

But the place was in a commotion when Tom Everson and Basil Belloc reached it that night, for two travellers had been found very much exhausted in the snow about a mile from the village, and in the excitement of caring for these unfortunates no one else stood any chance of attention.

Presently Tom caught sight of one of the sufferers, an undersized but precocious-looking native boy, who seemed to be recovering rapidly.

"I wonder where I have seen that boy before! It seems to me I ought to know him," he said to Basil, who was fuming considerably because no one seemed to pay the slightest heed to their requirements.

Basil craned his neck to look, then exclaimed in surprise, "Why, it is Tyke, one of our Inlet Indians! What is he doing here, I wonder?" and he elbowed his way through the throng of sympathizers to where the sufferer was being energetically rubbed with snow to his ultimate advantage but present discomfort, as testified by his howling protests.

"Hullo, Tyke! Where did you spring from?" demanded Basil, when by dint of pushing he had made his way into the inner circle.

The boy ceased his outcries, jerking up his head and staring in amazement at the questioner.

"Why, it am Boss Basil!" he ejaculated, in incredulous amazement, then enquired in tentative fashion, "An' you ain't dead neither?"

"Plainly not; but where did you spring from, boy?" demanded Basil brusquely.

"Me an' Missi Maudie set out for to go to de town, 'cause Boss Jim is drownded wid all de schooner crew, an' we was to see ships on wheels, an' stores, an' houses set in rows like herrings hung up to dry. But we got lost in de snow, an' foun', an' brought here," explained the boy, in a jumbled incoherent fashion, then commenced to howl again as a fresh onslaught of snow-scrubbing was begun upon his right hand and arm.

"Maudie here?" cried Basil, then turned at once to the door of the inner room, where he understood the other sufferer had been carried.

"The young lady is doing fine, but she can't see no one yet," announced the landlady, whose kindness was in excess of her culture, and then she shut the door in Basil's face.

He struggled back through the crowd to where Tom leaned against the door-frame, wondering a little drearily as to what reception he would get when he reached the Inlet next day.

"I say, Everson," he burst out excitedly. "It is as well we came this way to-night, for it is Maudie who was picked up in the snow, and they are taking care of her in yonder."

CHAPTER XXX

HOW IT BEFELL

MRS. NEAL and Paul passed the time of Maudie's absence in a strained waiting very hard to bear.

Even Hooee was restless and ill at ease, declaring that she heard spirits moaning round the house when darkness fell, which foretold disaster to Maudie, as well as confirmed Jim's woeful fate.

Little Ron was the only individual who found any enjoyment in life during those anxious days, and even he asked each morning in a plaintive tone if Uncle Jim would not soon come home again.

No sign of thaw appeared, though there were frequent showers of snow, with cloudy intervals, but when the sky cleared it froze harder than ever, until it seemed as if the Arctic world had stretched out a frozen hand to grip the soft, mild island-climate for its own.

"Will she come, do you think?" Paul said, rising from his almost untasted breakfast to begin upon the day's routine of work and waiting.

Mrs. Neal, who was looking pale and worn from a nearly sleepless night, shook her head with a dubious

air. "I have not forgiven myself yet that I let her go in such a fashion. The more I think of it the worse it seems," she said, struggling with an unruly sob, which caught her unexpectedly in the throat.

"Then don't think of it, or you will worry yourself sick, and what should I do then?" said Paul in a doleful tone, which brought a wan smile to Mrs. Neal's sad face.

"Let us put off the worrying until the evening, when, if Maudie has not appeared, we shall have legitimate cause for anxiety. Meanwhile we can forget our cares for awhile in hard work perhaps, there is no panacea so effectual as that," she answered, beginning to bustle round with a resolute air, which inspired hopefulness, and robbed the existing trouble of some of its gloom.

"When I am through with my wood-cutting I shall try for a chance at the geese, though I am afraid the air is so clear that they will hear me coming before I am in sight even," Paul said, urged on to effort by the brisk energy of her manner.

"That is well. Then if Maudie does come safely back from her travels to-day, she will see that we have at least tried to do our duty in her absence," Mrs. Neal rejoined, as she prepared for an especially active domestic campaign that day.

Noon came and passed, the house was speckless and spotless in every part; supper preparations were in that state of forwardness which only needed half an

hour's active attention to resolve into appetizing completeness. Mrs. Neal, with her frock tucked up and a big apron on, was busy superintending the work of the Indian women in the curing-sheds, when one of the children from the native village came rushing in to say that a sledge, drawn by men on snow-shoes, was coming over the hill from the tree-belt.

Dropping the fish she was counting from the smoke-house, Mrs. Neal rushed out to see if it was Maudie's arrival which the child had heralded, and was amazed to find herself confronted by Tom Everson, and a rough, shabby man, whom at first sight she did not recognize.

"Maudie? Where is she?" gasped Mrs. Neal in a bewildered tone.

"Here, and quite safe, Ella. Don't look so worried, dear, I am only taking it easy. And oh, don't you see that it is Basil?" cried Maudie, flinging back the sledge rugs and deer-skin wrappings in which she was enveloped, and preparing to spring out on to the snow, whilst the Tyke, who had been hanging on behind, pretending to push, but in reality enjoying a comfortable tow, emerged with a grin of satisfaction from the background.

But at the mention of Basil Mrs. Neal turned white to the lips, trembling violently.

"My husband?" she gasped, turning to the man whom she had not previously recognized, but knew now as Maudie's long-absent brother.

Basil shrank back as if she had struck him a blow, and turned with an imploring air to his sister. "Tell her, Maudie, I can't. Poor little woman, it seems so horribly cruel!" he whispered hoarsely.

Maudie needed no urging, unpleasant as was the task, and slipping her arm round the slight figure of Ella Neal, told her as gently and briefly as she could of the widowhood that was already two years old.

Just then Paul came hurrying from the berry-bush scrub on the opposite hill with two geese over his shoulder. He had seen the little party approaching, and returned home with all speed, going into a state of uproarious glee at the sight of his brother.

His coming drew off attention from Mrs. Neal, whose grief after all was more after the nature of chastened regret than poignant anguish, for she had so long believed her husband dead that the assured certainty of his demise was thus robbed of its sharpest pain.

It was to be a day of surprises, for hardly were the travellers housed, and recounting the trials and adventures of their journey, when Paul, who had been out to milk the cows, came hurrying indoors in a state of great excitement.

"There's a steam-tug coming into the harbour. Do you think it is bringing us any news of the wreck?" he said, his breath coming in panting gasps, whilst a whole world of delightful possibilities flashed

into his mind, only to be rejected as hopelessly impossible.

Maudie ran out through the porch, followed by Basil and Tom Everson, just as the approaching boat slid in through the entrance to the harbour and stood across the pool towards the landing-stage.

Just then a wild yell burst from the Tyke, who also had become aware of the approaching boat. "It am Boss Jim!" he screamed, dancing frantically. "It am Boss Jim, an' Katchewan, Kamloo, an' all de lot!"

At the sound of his ear-piercing yells a little crowd of women and children came rushing from the native huts to join their uproar to his, for there on the deck of the tug were plainly to be seen Jim Belloc and his Indian crew, with not a man of them missing.

What a meeting it was, and what a time of wild excitement! Maudie found herself sobbing bitterly from sheer strain of reaction, whilst Tom Everson held her hand, whispering words of consoling tenderness as Jim told the story of the rescue of himself and his crew by the Alberni mail-boat, just as the schooner was going to pieces.

Mrs. Neal was not visible, and Jim asked for her, as with Ron clucking and crowing joyfully in his arms he re-entered the house, where no one had thought to welcome him more.

Basil burst into the story of Charley Neal's death then, and his own indebtedness to the widow. "But I'll pay her back safe enough, Jim, principal and interest too. It sha'n't be said we robbed her, poor little woman!" he said, his voice shaking with emotion.

"There is no call for you to worry yourself, Basil old fellow. I will see that Mrs. Neal is well cared for," Jim said, turning away with a light on his face, which Maudie saw and was quick to understand, although the others did not.

. . . . . .

Jim was as good as his word. Six months later, when Tom Everson came to the Inlet on the new steam-tug to claim the fulfilment of the promise he had succeeded in winning from Maudie, he was accompanied by a clergyman who had double duty to perform.

There were two weddings next day, in the big sitting-room with the square fireplace, and when Jim, standing with Ella Neal's hand in his, promised to love and cherish his wife whilst life should last, every one present knew that the cherishing would be of a vastly more tender character than any Ella had known before.

Basil gave the brides away, whilst Paul acted as best man, Mr. Gibson and his wife being the only invited guests, whilst the uninvited ones comprised every Indian on the Inlet.

And the radiance of the summer sun flooded the landscape with beauty and light, but in the hearts of those who were wedded that day was a more refulgent glory than even the midsummer brilliance outside—the light of love!