

cup into the boiling tea-pot. She took the pot off the fire and poured the hot contents into a cup that had just held the steaming side.

"It's pretty strong, I'm afraid," she said. "The leaves weren't fresh, and I boiled them too long. I'm afraid you'll find it bitter."

"I don't think it's bitter as gall," she said, and reached and seized the handle of the cup. She seemed to writhe as if in convulsion. Her voice rose in a shrill scream. "Ben—Ben—drink it!" she cried. "God's mercy on my soul!"



"BEN — BEN — DON'T DRINK IT!" SHE CRIED. "GOD HAVE MERCY ON MY SOUL!"

She reached and knocked the cup from his hand; and its black contents, like dark blood, stained the sandy floor of the cavern.

"Never mind, Beatrice," the man was saying, his deep, rough voice gentle as a woman's. "Don't cry—just forget all about it. Let's go over to your hammock and rest awhile."

"But you don't understand—you don't know—what I tried to do—"

His rugged face lighted as he smiled, kindly and tolerantly. But her solemn voice arrested him.

"Wait, Ben, I want you to know—so you won't trust me again. The cup—was poisoned."

The man looked at her, in infinite compassion, then came and sat beside her in the hammock. Rather quietly he took one of her hands. Then he pressed it to his lips.

"You'd kiss my hand—after what I did?"

"After what you didn't do, he corrected.

"They would need fuel in plenty to keep the fire bright tonight. Evidently rain was impending—one of those cold steady down-pours that are disliked so cordially."

He went a full two hundred yards before he found a tree to his liking. It was a tough spruce of medium height and just at the edge of the stream. He laid his fallen log; then he began his work. His blows struck true from habit. Suddenly his axe crashed into yielding, rotten wood.

Half of the tree had been rotten, changing the direction of its fall and crashing it down before its time.

Ben leaped for his life, instinctively aiming for the shelter of the log against which he had inclined his rifle; but the blow came too soon.

Ben's rifle, catching the full might of the blow, was broken like a match. Ben himself was crushed to earth as beneath a meteor. The rain clouds deepened and spread above his motionless form.

Beatrice's dreams were troubled after Ben's departure into the forest.

She opened her eyes; the cavern was deep with shadow.

She wondered why Ben did not come into the cave. Was he embittered against her after all?

Her uneasiness was swiftly developing into panic.

The night was chill; she longed for the comfort of the fire. The actual labor of building it might take her mind from her fears for a while. Besides it might be a beacon light for Ben. She turned at once to the pile of kindling Ben had prepared.

But before she could build a really satisfactory fire, one that would endure the rain, she must

CHAPTER XV  
The Conspirators Disagree

The pine knots flickered feebly and by their light she looked about for Ben's axe. Her eyes rested on the broken gun first; then she saw the blade, shining in the rain, protruding from beneath a broken bough. She drew it out and swung it down.

How and by what might she did not know, but almost at once the man's body was free except for the tree trunk that wedged him against a dead log toward which he had leaped for shelter.

Seeing that she could not move the tree itself she thrust with all her power against the dead log, beside which Ben lay. In a moment she had rolled it aside.

One of his arms was broken; its position indicated that. Some of his ribs were crushed too—what internal injuries he had that might end him before the morning she did not know. She worked her shoulder under his body.

Wrenching with all her fine young strength she lifted him upon her shoulder; then, kneeling in the vines, she struggled for breath. Then thrusting with her arm she got on her feet.

At the end of a hundred yards she stopped to rest leaning against a tree and still holding the beloved weight upon her shoulder. She plunged on, down toward the beacon light.

She plunged on and laid her burden on her bed.

Then she relaxed at his feet breathing in sobbing gasps.

But far distant though Ben and deep as he slept—just outside the dark portals of death itself—those sounds went down to him. He lay a long time, trying to understand.

On her knees beside him Beatrice saw the first flutter of his eyelids. In awe, rather than rap-ture, her arms crept around him, and she kissed his rain-wet brow. His eyes opened, looked wonderingly into hers.

"The tree got me, didn't it?" he asked.

"Don't try to talk," she cautioned. "Yes—the tree fell on you. But you're not going to die. You're going to live, live—"

He shook his head, the half-smile flickered at his lips. "Let me talk, Beatrice," he said. "It's important—and I don't think—I have much time."

Her eyes widened in horror.

"You don't mean—"

"I'm going back in a minute—I can't hardly keep awake," he said. His voice, though feeble, was preternaturally clear.

"I believe that tree got me—clear inside—but you must listen to everything I say."

She nodded. In that eerie moment of suspense she knew she must hear what he had to tell her.

"Don't wait to see what happens to me," he went on. "I'll either go out or I'll live—you really can't help me any. Where's the rifle?"

"The rifle was broken when the tree fell."

"I knew it would be. I saw it coming. Beatrice—please, please don't stay here, trying to save me. Do you think I would go?" she cried.

"You must. The food—is about gone. Take the pistol. There's six shot or so—in the box. The rifle's broken and we can't get meat. It's just—death—if you wait."

"And leave you here to die, as long as there's a chance to save you?" the girl answered. "You couldn't get up to get water—or build a fire—"

He listened patiently but shook his head at the end.

He struggled for breath and she thought he had slipped back into unconsciousness. But in a moment

cut fuel from some of the logs Ben had hewn down and dragged to the cave. She lighted a short piece of pitchy wood, intending to locate the heavy camp axe. Then, putting on her heavy coat—the same garment of lustrous fur which Ben had sent her back for the day of her abduction—she ventured into the storm.

The rain splashed in vain at her torch. The pitch burned with a fierce flame. But her eyes sought in vain for the axe.

Ben had taken it; he had plainly gone forth after fuel. Trees stood all about the little glade; he couldn't have gone far.

Holding her torch high she went to the edge of the glade and called into the gloom.

She turned at once to the cave and piling up her kindling, built a fire just at the mouth of the cave. This fire would serve to keep her direction and lead her back to the cavern.

Then she hunted for pine knots taken from scrub pines that grew in scattering clumps among the spruce and which were laden with pitch.

One of these knots she put in the iron pan they used for frying then lighted it. Then she pushed into the timber.

Holding her light high she began to encircle the glade clear to the barrier of the cliffs.

With courage and strength such as she had not dreamed she possessed, she launched forward. But fatigue was breaking her now. The tree roots tripped her faltering feet, the branches clutched at her as she passed. It was hard to tell what territory she had searched, or how far she had gone.

The flickering light revealed a tree, freshly cut, its naked stump gleaming and its tall form lying prone. Yet beneath it the shadows were of strange unearthly shape, and something showed stark white through the green foliage. Great branches stretched over it, like bars over a prison window.

Her strength wilted and for an instant she could only stand and gaze which fixed unbelieving eyes. But almost at once the unquench-able fires of her spirit blazed up anew.

Instantly she was beside the form of her comrade and enemy, struggling with the cruel limbs that pinned him to the earth.

Yet he dared not turn back. She might yet live, held prisoner in some far-off cave.

At first all three agreed on this point: that they must not turn back until either Ben was crushed under their heels or they had made sure of his death.

They were still partners in their effort to rescue the girl and slay her abductor; otherwise they were at sword's points.

In mental distress and physical discomfort can constitute vengeance, Ben was already avenged. One rainy, disagreeable morning, as they camped beside the river near the mouth of a small creek, affairs reached their crisis. They had caught and saddled the horses; Ray was pulling tight the last hitch. Cran stood beside him, speaking in an undertone. When he had finished Ray cursed explosively in the silence.

Neilson turned. He seemed to sense impending developments. "What now?" he asked.

"I'm not going on, that's what it is," Ray replied. "Neilson, it's two against one—if you want to go on you can—but Ray and I are going back."

"You're going back, eh—scared out!" Neilson commented coldly.

"I'm going back—and don't say too much about being scared out either."

"And you too Chan? You're against me too?"

Chan cursed. "I'd gone a week ago if it'd been me. We know the way home at least."

The old man looked a long time into the river depths.

"Then turn the horses around, you cowards," he answered. "I can't go on alone."

For once neither Ray or Chan had outward resentment for the epithet. Secretly they realized that old Neilson was to the wall at last and like a grizzly at bay it was safer not to molest him. Chan went down to the edge of the creek to water his saddle horse.

But presently they heard him curse, in inordinate and startled amazement, as he gazed at some imprint in the mud on the shore.

Clear and unmistakable in the mud was the stale imprint of Ben's canoe as they had landed and the tracks of both the man and the girl as they had turned into the forest.

The dawn that crept so gray and mysterious over the frosty green of spruce brought no hope to Beatrice, sitting beside the unconscious form of Ben in the cave fronting the glade.



"When the stormy winds do blow" So goes the old sea song, and it would be good advice to add

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the faltering current of his speech began again.

"Take the pistol—and go," he told her. "You showed me today how to give up—and I don't want to kill—you father—any more. I renounce it all! Ezram—forgive me—old Ez that lay dead in the leaves."

Unconsciousness welled high above him, and the lids dropped over his eyes. And Ezram, watching high and afar, and with infinitesimal knowledge at last the true balance of all things one with another, gave him his full forgiveness.

The trail was long and steep in to Back There for Jeffery Neilson and his men.

They had counted on slow travel, but the weeks grew into months before they even neared the obscure heart of Back There where they thought Ben and Beatrice might be hidden.



WRENCHING WITH ALL HER FINE YOUNG STRENGTH SHE LIFTED HIM UPON HER SHOULDER.

The days passed, June and July ever they moved at a slower pace. The food stores brought for the journey were rapidly depleted. No experience of their individual lives had ever presented such a daily ordeal of physical distress none had ever been so devastating to hope and spirit.

Jeffery Neilson had almost forgotten the issue of the claim by now. He had told the truth, those weary weeks before, when he had wished he had never seen it. His only thought was of his daughter.

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(Continued on Page 2)

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