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ME-LEE of THE NORTH

by

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(See Frontispiece)

TOM CRAIG looked like a worn-out business man when he came up into the North country, though he was not much past thirty. There were little lines and a tense look about his mouth, and a wistful sickness in his clear gray eyes—eyes that were almost too clear.

He seemed to have no business, and neither did he appear to be on a vacation for his health. Wherever he went, people looked a bit more closely at him than at ordinary men, for there was a certain fighting shyness about him, an aloofness, a nervous desire to be by himself that was not natural, and which, with the strange and almost beautiful clearness of his eyes, attracted attention.

Some guessed instinctively that he was grappling with something which was not disease, for he bore none of the signs of physical blight; others wondered; many talked. But Tom Craig confided in no one. The few words he exchanged with those about him were no more than the strictest courtesy demanded.

He watched people closely, especially women, and there were a few who noticed that a strange smile, which might have been of irony or contempt, crept subtly about his lips when he was looking at the other sex. The clerk in the

King Edward, at North Bay, observed this most closely, and made his guess.

Craig remained at North Bay for a month and then went on to Sudbury. He visited the nickel and silver mines and looked over a few claims, but with no idea of investing. A dozen times he dropped off at wilderness stations along the line of the Canadian Pacific between Sudbury and Port Arthur, and wherever he stopped, people soon came to ask themselves why he had stopped.

He was a person without a motive. He asked no questions, sought no information, came quietly, paid his bills quietly, and departed so unostentatiously that he left mystery, and at times suspicion, behind him. He shunned the larger places, and at Nipigon hired a guide to canoe him fifty miles back in the wilderness. When he returned there was a different look in his eyes, his face was tanned, his lips were not so tense. But even his guide had not learned who he was, where he had come from, or what his business in life might be.

For six months he drifted slowly westward, lying over for nine hours at Blind Indian River, that he might pass through Winnipeg in the night. Early in the autumn he got off at Regina, walked directly to the office of the

Commissioner of the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and showed that most important person in the province a letter which gained for him an audience that lasted for more than an hour.

When the two came from the commissioner's private office, the Big Man shook hands with him, spoke a few low words, and Craig was a "rookie" in the force. He spent three weeks in barracks learning to ride and shoot, and was then detailed to a patrol that was on the look-out for cattle-rustlers in the prairie country. He straightened up. The tired and worn expression left his face. He rode hard, and his muscles toughened. But the look of age, the look of a strange sickness, still haunted far back in the depths of his eyes.

Late in the winter he was transferred, with a Corporal, to a new post that had been established at the headwaters of the Gray Beaver, two hundred miles straight north of civilization, in the Reindeer Lake country, west of Hudson's Bay. There was a little cabin-freshly built, and in this he and Corporal Scottie McTabb lived alone, patrolling the wild country north, west, and east of them for a hundred miles or more.

When the first days of spring came, Scottie McTabb knew this much about him: His name was Thomas Craig. He had been in the service nine months. He was an American, and before he came into the North he had been a doctor. Scottie learned this when he was down with a fever. There is small joy in living alone with a man as uncommunicative as a clam, two hundred miles from the last outpost, and the monotony of it began to wear on Scottie.

But one day there came a change, which was dynamic in its suddenness. Craig set out on a two-days' trip northwest. It was a different man who returned. There was luster in his eyes. His cheeks were filled with a new flush; his voice was different; his step was different; the grip of his hand was different, when he greeted Scottie McTabb. The little Scotch corporal waited, conjecturing at this new spirit, and it was while he was frying bacon for supper that the thing came out.

"Scottie," said Craig, puffing hard at his pipe, "I hit the outlet of Silver Fox Creek coming back. It's not more than ten miles from here, is it?"

"About that," said Scottie.

"There's a Frenchman—a trapper—lives there. His name is Croisset, and he's married to an English woman. He's a half-breed—small and as black as an Indian. Know anything about 'em?"

"No."

Craig rose to his feet and paced back and forth across the cabin, puffing out blue volumes of smoke.

"They've got a girl," he said, at last, and there was a curious tremble in his voice. "She ran in while I was there, with her arms full of red *bakneesh*. I didn't notice anything much except her eyes and her hair. I've dreamed of such eyes, but I've never seen them before. She's about eighteen, I guess—a wild-flower of the forests, with her hair in a great long braid—"

He stopped, and laughed a little confusedly.

"She struck me as being very pretty," he finished.

Scottie straightened and looked at Craig.

"She's more than that, aint she, Craig?" he asked, laughing. "Come to think of it, I believe I do know something about them. There was a Breed lived down on the Beaver two years ago, with an English wife, and they used to talk about his girl at the post. A raving beauty, that's what she was. Her name was Marie."

"Yes," said Craig, quietly, "her name is Marie."

Scottie almost allowed the bacon to burn in his astonishment.

"You don't say!" he gasped. Then he laughed, and winked broadly at his companion. "I'm glad they've moved up near us, Tom. That little girl will do you good. That's what you need to make you sociable—a woman."

He was about to turn when the look that shot into Craig's face held him.

"She's only a girl—a little girl," he said; and there was that haunting repressiveness in his voice and manner again that irritated Scottie McTabb. He

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put down his bacon and stood over Craig, his blue eyes firing up with sudden determination.

"See here, Craig," he demanded, gently, "you've got to come over with me! You're putting me on the blink, do you understand? If you're a murderer, out with it, and I'll help you. You aint agreeable, and it's because there's something on your mind. I'm not curious. I don't give a cuss for other people's secrets. But why not let me in on this? Company's good for one, you know. It might help. Let me in. What's up?"

His hand dropped on Craig's shoulder, and a yearning crept into Craig's eyes. Scottie was the first to come at him in that way. There was comradeship in the little Scotchman's eyes.

Craig's face flushed as he answered.

"I believe it—would help," he said, slowly. "Anyway, it will help to excuse me for being so beastly out of sorts. You see, Scottie—old man—it's one of those things a man thinks he ought to keep to himself. It's just the oldest—and the newest—story on earth: a woman, the other man—the crash. The plot is nearly always the same, with only a few variations. Sometimes there's a scandal, a murder, or a suicide. The fourth variation is when a man doesn't make a fool of himself. I didn't. Understand?"

"Yes," said Scottie, but he went on, relentlessly: "She was your wife?"

"Yes."

Scottie's hand tightened on the other's shoulder.

"Let's hear about it."

"It's brief," said Craig, "because there's nothing new. I was a doctor, with a fair practice, and my fortune to make. And she—she was just what you called the little girl over there—a beauty. We were happy, almost like a couple of kids, until we moved to a bigger city. And then—mebby you can understand it, Scottie—she was so beautiful that she began to attract attention, and she came to like it. Automobiles, fine clothes, dreams I couldn't materialize, a few parties, and then the other man, and his bunch of money. When I found it out I wiped the slate clean, perhaps a little too quietly. That was two years

ago. Six months after I left, she had her divorce, and they were married. They were in Europe the last I heard."

"Any children?" asked Scottie.

"No."

The little corporal drew Craig to his feet and pulled him out through the door into the day that was fading into night. The smells of spring were in the air. The fat poplar buds were bursting. From the top of their ridge they could look down upon miles and miles of the quiet wilderness. For a moment Scottie pointed, without speaking. There came to them the distant mooring of a bull moose, calling for a mate; behind them, in a dense clump of black spruce, an owl chortled in sleepy awakening. There was something of majestic peace in the day's end. Craig felt his lungs filling with the pure air, and the glory of the solitudes filled his soul with a strange rest even before Scottie spoke.

"See what you've come to, Tom," he said, at last. "I was worse than you when I came up here, for I was dying of bad lungs. Look! Aint it glorious? You've got *that*, and she—why, she's gone to hell," he said, simply.

For an instant Craig's hands clenched. But there was the touch of a brother in Scottie's hand as he said:

"Let's go in and finish the bacon."

II

Later, Craig went out alone, and smoked. The confession that he had made to Scottie, the revelation of heart-ache that he had sworn to keep to himself, had already helped him, as the little corporal had predicted. But he knew that after a little he would regret having made that confession, for Scottie would see less and less of manhood in him now if he did not straighten up, like a tree that has been bent and twisted by storm, and face life anew. For Scottie could not understand, no man could understand, and he was already sorry that he had weakened.

What if he should tell Scottie that in his bitterest hours he could not bring himself to see the Woman as she was, but always as she had been once upon a

time in a fairyland of long ago? Scottie would call him a fool.

Fact and reason could not shatter this thing that was in him. More than once during those last six months he had seen her cheeks flushed with the flush of wine, her eyes sparkling with the triumph of conquest, her beautiful body throbbing with the new and maddening spirit that had taken possession of her. Scottie, and most other men, would have seen her like that, and would have cursed her. But it was different with him, perhaps because he was an idealist and had worshiped at the foot of a shrine which no shock could destroy.

He saw her again to-night, as he had seen her a thousand times in his wanderings, back in the little village where paradise had opened its gates to him. He saw again the glorious flush in her cheeks, but it was the flush of their happy frolic in the orchard back of their little home, where the sunbeams and the white petals of the apple blossoms danced in the lustrous gold of her hair. He saw the laughter and the triumphs in her eyes, but they were of love and purity. He could not tell Scottie these things. They were of his own madness, and no man would understand.

A week later he was near the outlet of Silver Fox Creek, and something turned him in the direction of Pierre Croisset's cabin. It was early in the afternoon, and the sun was warm, and the air was filled with the pleasant perfume of earth and shrub and tree bursting into life. He had come within a quarter of a mile of Pierre's home when a sound stopped him. It was the low growling of a dog, very near to him; and then, as he listened, there came a girlish peal of laughter, so clear and sweet that he smiled in sheer sympathy with it.

He drew quietly nearer to the sound, and suddenly he found the sunlit glow of the Silver Fox almost at his feet. The girl's laugh rippled up to him again, and he peered down through a break in the balsam. Marie Croisset was so close that he could have tossed a pebble upon her bare head. In the center of the stream was a rock, upon which she had lured a huge, tawny-

haired sledge-dog. From her canoe the girl was teasing him.

Craig chuckled softly as he looked down upon their play. The girl's beauty stirred him strangely. It was half a child's beauty, half a woman's. Her slender body seemed a part of the canoe; her movements were like music as she balanced herself after each reckless feint toward the rock, or swift dip of her cedar paddle. Her round, brown arms were bare to the elbow, and suddenly she plunged one of them deep into the water and sent a cascade of spray over her comrade on the rock.

Craig caught the cry on his lips. For a moment she lost her balance. The canoe tipped; she gave a shrill little cry, and then, after another moment of suspense in which Craig was ready to jump, the frail craft straightened. The girl's heavy braid had slipped over her shoulder into the water, and as she bent her head so that the drip of it would not wet her, she pointed a playful finger at the dog.

"Now see what you've done, Trigger!" she cried. "I must go ashore and dry my hair, and you—you must swim!"

She swung the canoe quickly to the sandy shore, almost directly under Craig, and sprang out with the lightness of a fawn. Then her fingers slipped with feminine swiftness through the glistening strands of her hair, and before Craig could move, it fell in a dark and rippling glory to her hips, enriched by the pale glow of the sun that was already sinking behind the forests.

He caught the laughing beauty of her face as she turned, its deep, wild-rose flush, the glow of her eyes, the taunting loveliness of her red lips as she laughed at Kazan on the rock; and with that vision of her breaking like a ray of sunlight into his darkened soul, Craig slipped quietly away.

He was curiously excited, and he found himself thinking strange things. It was not exertion that had made his heart beat a little faster or that had brought the warm glow into his face. His thoughts moved swiftly as he went toward Croisset's. He had looked upon a miracle. He had found beauty, and



"You are the purest and most beautiful creature in the world, Me-Lee," he
cried softly

purity, and happiness, in the heart of a wilderness; and in spite of him there rose another face before him—the face of one who was delving to the depths of life itself, in her search for the happiness which had come to this girl whose only companion outside of her cabin home was a dog!

For an hour he smoked his pipe with Croisset, while Croisset's wife prepared an early supper. And then Marie came, running breathlessly with Trigger at her heels, her unbound hair still leaping in riotous beauty about her. When she saw Craig standing before her, straight and smiling, his hand reaching out to her, there came a swift change in her face. The red blood surged into her cheeks; the laughter left her eyes; and Craig, looking deep into them as he held her small, trembling hand, saw something in their shy loveliness that was not of the child—but of woman.

It was late when he left. The moon had risen, and the wonderful world about him was bathed in its soft radiance. Croisset and the girl went with him to the beginning of the trail at the edge of the clearing. He shook hands with Pierre. The half-breed was relighting his pipe when he took Marie's hand again and looked once more down deep into her eyes. They met his own, a little frightened, a little questioningly, lustrously beautiful and pure in the moon-glow; and Craig saw in them that something—indefinable—more marvelous than life—which his soul had been crying to see in another woman's eyes since the dawn of desire within him. And now he knew that he had never seen it, not even in those first days of the Fairyland, years and years ago.

"Good-night, little Marie," he whispered.

And that night, for the first time, his voice rose in song as he went homeward through the forest.

III

Twice each week, and then three times, Craig went to Croisset's cabin now. And each time that wonderful thing that he had found in the girl's

eyes grew larger and more beautiful for him, until at last it walked with him, like a spirit, when he was alone, soothing the old pain at his heart, filling up the gnawing emptiness, covering over with sweetness and purity and love the ghastly ruins of what had once been. And still, as the weeks of spring drifted into summer, he spoke no word of love, and told Marie nothing of what had happened in the days gone by. He dreaded the moment of telling the story of his broken and twisted life.

And at last the day of it came. They had climbed to the top of the Sun Rock, half a mile from the Croisset cabin, and a hundred feet beneath them the vast solitude of green swamp and forest and sunlit lake reached out mile upon mile. Marie sat at his feet, gazing out upon the wonderful world, with her chin resting in the cup of her hands.

"Marie," he said, suddenly, "I like your other name best—the Indian name which your father sometimes calls you. It's going to be my name for you. Mellee—what does it mean?"

He saw the color deepening in the girl's cheek. She looked up at him, and there was a mischievous glow in her eyes.

"It is Cree," she said. "An old Indian first called me that down at the mission, where I went to school."

"I know," he persisted, "but what does it mean?"

The color grew deeper. She did not look up again.

"Do you see—off there—where the sun is setting?" she asked. "Out there—somewhere between the forests and the mountains—is what the Crees call the Valley of Silent Men. It is the Indian Heaven. There was a time, ages and ages ago, when the Crees had no Heaven, and at that time there lived a great chief who had a daughter so good and so beautiful that the Great Spirit himself fell in love with her, and came down upon earth to take her for his wife. But the old chief loved her, and wouldn't give her up, until at last the Great Spirit promised that in return for his daughter he would create a great Happy Hunting Ground in which all

of the chief's people would come to life and live forever after death. The chief gave up his daughter, and so, when his people die, they now go into the Valley of Silent Men. The girl's name was Me-lee."

Craig's hand touched her shoulder.

"The old Indian down at the mission was right, Me-lee."

She felt the warmth of his hand, and trembled.

"Why?" she whispered.

"Because—because you are the purest and the most beautiful creature in the world, Me-lee," he cried, softly. "And I love you—love you—"

His arms gathered her close, and then in the shame and the joy that swept through him like sudden fire, he knew that the time had come when he must tell her all that he had told Scottie back in the cabin—and more. He kissed her lips again and again; he felt the throb and quiver of her body against him, and heard the sobbing tremulousness of her breath as her face nestled in sweet surrender against his own. He knew that she loved him—loved him as no other woman had ever loved him in his life, and when he lifted her face, and found her beautiful eyes humid with the tears of her happiness, he could only hold her closer, fighting to find a beginning for the thing which he wished to say.

It came hard, slowly at first, with Me-lee's pure eyes looking up into his own. And into those eyes, as he went on with the terrible story, there came the dark, startled pain of one who has learned that she is not first, the look that Craig had dreaded to see. But in an instant something else took its place, a look of wistful intentness; of pain for him—and her hand stole up to his face, and stroked it with the gentleness of one who understood, and who grieved because of his grief. Craig could look no longer into her eyes, and as he went on he gazed unseeing over her head into the world beyond. He left nothing unsaid. And at the end he felt Me-lee press closer to him, and with the sweetness of a child she raised her lips to his, and twined her arms about his neck.

IV

After that, in the days that followed, Me-lee seemed to Craig something more than child or woman. In her eyes, in her gentle touch, in her wistful quickness to respond to his moods, he saw that she was fighting for him—and not for herself. Stranger to the world from which he had come, she saw his wounds and lived to heal them. It was wonderful to Craig. It was as if he had been close to death and she was nursing him back to life. Never did he see in her eyes what he might have expected to find there—the troublous visioning of the other woman. The time came when Craig knew that, if to sacrifice herself would give him greater happiness, Me-lee would send him back to the life and the woman he had once known. At last he had found love as he had dreamed that love should be.

It was mid-summer when a messenger came up from Nelson House with word for Craig. He was wanted there at once. There was no explanation. He was wanted on a matter of importance.

Scottie carried word to Me-lee, while Craig started south the next day. It was evening of the third day when Craig reached Nelson House. There were lights in the factor's quarters, and Craig went there at once. Blood, the Hudson Bay Company's agent, greeted him mysteriously. He wrung Craig's hands until they ached, and almost immediately excused himself a little excitedly. He was gone five minutes, and Craig sat down, wondering what was in the wind.

He heard Blood returning. And then the door to the big, lighted room which was the factor's "den" opened and closed softly, and he heard a quick, gasping breath. His back was turned, and he whirled about.

"Good God!" he cried, springing to his feet.

Five steps away, her arms reaching out to him, her beautiful face filled with a longing and a joy which he had never seen there before, stood the woman who had once been his wife.

"Tom!"

Some strange thing leaped into his head, and dazed him. He staggered

toward her with a wild, low cry, seeing her through half blindness, and her name fell from his lips in a great sob. For a few insane moments reason left him. He felt her arms almost choking him in their embrace. Her lips were kissing him. He heard her repeating his name, over and over again, and he caught her to his breast madly.

"Isobel—"

The sound of her name brought him back, and with a still stranger cry he thrust her away from him, and stood facing her with a face as white as death.

"Tom—Tom—" she moaned, quailing before the terrible look which she saw in his eyes now, "I've been searching for you—hunting for you—for months and months. Oh, my God! Tom—Tom—you'll take me back! I didn't know how I loved you—until after—that. You'll take me back—you'll take me back—"

Her arms reached to him pleadingly, but his fingers did not unclinch. He noticed now that she was dressed in a white, shimmering gown that made her look like an angel. She was older; there were the faintest lines about her mouth, but she was more beautiful than ever.

"Forbes—" He spoke the name in a hard, cold voice.

"He is dead," she said. "He died six months—after—after—we were married Tom—I've suffered—more than I can ever tell. I've been punished. Oh, Tom, I've been punished—"

"And he left you his money?"

Her eyes lit up at the eagerness of his question.

"Yes—yes—I am rich, Tom. And it is yours, all yours! Oh, you will forgive me—you will forgive me—you will take me back—"

Her arms were about him again; her white bosom throbbed against him, and she crushed her face against his breast.

He did not speak. His arms hung at his side. For a time he stared hard and unseeing at the wall. Then, so tenderly that a red flush of triumph surged into her face, he kissed her and pushed her away from him. The harshness was gone from his face. She saw a wonderful peace in his eyes.

"He left you—plenty of money?" he asked, gently.

"Enough to last us always," she cried. "Nearly—nearly a million!"

Her white fingers were clasping and unclasping in the filmy lace at her breast.

"We can travel," she went on, excitement glorifying her eyes. "We can go where you have always wanted to go. You need never work again, Tom—never—never." She emphasized the words almost shrilly.

He held out his hand, and led her to the door. It was a white, pure night. Over the top of the earth the polar star gleamed like a mellow moon. The Great Dipper shone like a constellation of stars. Under the glorious sky the wilderness lay black and silent and peaceful. She looked into his face, and marveled at its quiet happiness.

"You have made me suffer—terribly," he said, in a low voice, "but I do not lay it up against you. No, I do not forgive you to-night, Isobel—because I forgave you long ago—up there,"—and he pointed into the North. "I am glad he left you the money. It will be a reward for your suffering. I hope you will be happy—always. And I—"

"And you—" She trembled.

"See!" he cried, pointing again to the dazzling star. "Up there. I went, wrecked and shattered, soul and heart gone—and I found peace. A woman—a girl—gave them back to me. What would you have me do?"

"We will pay her," whispered the woman who had been his wife.

"Yes, we will pay her," he repeated, and his face was illumined with the joy of the thought. "And what do you think would be fair payment for the saving of a man's soul?" he asked.

"Ten thousand—twenty thousand—more—more, if that is not enough."

He was tightening his belt.

"I am going to pay her—on Christmas day," he said, quietly. "We are going to be married then. Good-by, Isobel, and may God bless you—always!"

Like a shadow he slipped away into the white gloom of the night, into the North.