

to light in and snow so bad. We been on the road since 3 o'clock."

A lady! Pamela Brooke. Four weeks—that was it—the four weeks he had delayed that letter.

Apology was in Lige Walker's voice, and something else—panic. Lige had not told her, had not told Ely's girl who had come all the way in from Little Travois.

"Ah—you better come in." Lucien hardly knew his own voice. It had a flat, far away quality. Like that of a man talking in his sleep. The girl climbed down nimbly. She was bundled to shapelessness in many coats. Lucien recognized the old moth eaten beaver belonging to the station agent at Mahopac as the outer covering.

"I'm stiff," she said in an even, melodious voice. "Ely—Ely is better?"

Lucien flamed with hot agony. It had been hard enough to write it down—but this—

He began feebly. "Ely—Ely—"

Lige Walker eagerly assisted. "Yes'm. Ely he—now Ely—"

They moved toward the house. "He is better?" insisted the girl.

Lucien could not speak. He opened the door. And just then the gust blew out the light, but even as the flame died he saw her face, knew that she had noted that solemnly empty bed.

She clutched the door posts on either side, her hands lost in great fur gloves.

"Ely is dead?"

Lucien nodded, the agony in his eyes only faintly less than her own.

"I wrote you a letter—but the snow has been so bad. The trains weren't running—there wasn't any mail—"

"No," she repeated dully, "there wasn't any mail."

Lige Walker broke in, eager to smooth the sharp angles of the situation. "I could 'a' told you down yonder to Mahopac, ma'am. I could 'a' told you Ely was gone. But I thought mebbe Loosh would ruther break the news himself. Been four weeks now, ain't it, Loosh, since Ely was took? That's it—four weeks. Just 'fore the big snow come, I recollect—cold spell come along and fro mthe ground six foot deep. Loosh certainly took care of Ely mighty grand, ma'am. He was a friend and a father to that boy. Some of us come out and set up long 'ords the last, but Loosh never left him a minute. Held his head when his breath got short—and Ely he says—"

"My God, Lige—shut up!" This from Lucien, who was white with anguish.

The girl had sunk into a chair, where she huddled, a shapeless bundle of fur, with a fair tress of hair straying out and two eyes burning like blue flames in a face as white as death. She stared straight in front of her while the two men looked on miserably.

"I knew," she said dully, after a little. "All the way up—somehow—I knew. After the letters stopped coming—I knew. But I kept on hoping—you can't stop hoping, even when you feel it's no use. Thank you for being kind to him."

Lucien's straight brows drew down. "Kind to him?" he repeated. "Kind to Ely?"

"I guess you don't know about Loosh and Ely, ma'am," volunteered Lige Walker. "They been like brothers, you might say, ever since they came up here to this piece of timber. I guess if you'd seen Loosh standing there when we were fillin' up the—"

"Lige!" warned Lucien sharply. He turned to the girl. "Nobody loved Ely better than I did," he said. "We shared everything, Miss Brooke. He was all I had—"

"And you let him die!" A desolate agony was in her voice, but to Lucien Mefford's ears, made too keen by grief and pride and solitude, the tremor of her words was scorn; the flick of a lash, the flash of blue, bitter fire. He stiffened. "Good God!"

Like a wall of frosted steel the shadow which had shut him in barring him gently away from this love of Ely's which he could not share, fell crystallized suddenly into a definite icy prison. Through its frozen and unfriendly glitter he beheld Pamela Brooke—a woman of snow and marble, white throated, eyes like blue ice, hostile. He drew back a step, shivering a little, his black brows bent. Then he inclined his head stiffly.

"This horse is your's, Miss Brooke. It is yours as it was Ely's. I am sorry for what has happened—but it cannot be helped. Please make yourself comfortable. We better see about your horse, Lige."

In the stable Lige Walker relieved his mind. "Ely woulda played hell marryin' that girl, now wouldn't he? Buckin' a half section of raw stump land with a white fingered woman like that—and him coughin' up his guts half the time."

"What the devil did you bring her up here for—and not tell her?"

"Gosh, how could I tell her—her looking through me that way she's got, like I was a cold draft out of the north or something equally in-

significant? Callin' me my good man, orderin' me to drive her to Ely Lucas' place immediately. Where'd Ely pick up an iceberg like her?"

"Ely came out of the provinces after the war. His people had money—lost most of it, I guess."

"Yeah—but Ely didn't give you a mouthful of high and mighty talk. If he wanted anything he'd yell out 'Hi, you old sun of a gun'—same as anybody. She was mighty took back when I told her it was 14 miles up here on shoes, and the roads all blowed to hell with drifts higher than the devil can spit. 'Did you know Ely was fixin' to git married?'"

"Yes, he told me." Lucien thought with dull pang of the times that Ely had tried to tell him; tried to plan the future, dream aloud his boyish dreams of Pamela Brooke. "She'll make this shack a home, Loosh. And you'll be a brother to both of us." Always Lucien's own grudging silences had chilled Ely's confidences. Always the shadow had fallen. The memory hurt.

"What you goin' to do with her, Loosh?"

"She can have what was Ely's. I guess he would have wanted her to have it."

"I guess Ely hadn't told her much about you. She got a notion you was some kind of a hired man—somebody Ely's befriended and helped out. She was took back when I told her you owned this hull section."

"The land was mine, but the money was Ely's. Half of everything was his—half of everything." Lucien's voice held a dead level. But into his soul a bard had thrust, rending, poisoning. In every fiber he was loyal to Ely, but doubt began to work like a toxin, brewing swift, insidious decay. He tramped out of the barn and swallowed through the welter of the blizzard to the drifted place beneath the hemlock. There he leaned his head against the sadly singing tree, and let wretchedness possess him. This was a new pain—jealousy—and doubt.

"I don't guess Ely had told her much about you."

He fought it with argument and cold logic. "Why the devil should he have told her about me?" Lige Walker was a liar, a cheap malicious liar who distorted the truth to see men wince. And what was there about him—silent, esoteric, dogged Lucien Mefford, that would fit into a love letter?

"You're a fool!" he scoffed at himself. "You're about as romantic as a crosscut saw!"

But in the hollow core of his heart, in that aching, empty place which had been Ely's, a wall persisted. If he, Lucien, had owned a girl, what could he have written to her that would not have been colored with Ely, red and brown and laughing with Ely, steeped and tintured with Ely? Had he mattered so little, then, in the boy's life?

"Loosh, you're a damn fool," he scorned. "You're acting like a fool woman. He was all you had—and you were only a little part of what he had—and wanting to be all!"

It was always that way. Out of every two there must be one who loves deepest, gives most. He walked back to the house, bearing against the wind.

Within Pamela Brooke still sat beside the stove. She had not taken off her wraps.

"The big snow is here, Miss Brooke," Lucien told her. "You may have to stay for some time. You will have this room. Lige and I will bunk in the leanto."

For three days the storm held, and in the tar paper shack a great silence, keen strung and tense as the blue stillness of the pines, abode, broken only by the spasmodic grumbling of Lige Walker, who spat on the stove and cursed the snow which whirled uneasily and refused to settle, cursed the fool woman who made all the trouble for a man, cursed the green hissing wood and the cold, even the frozen sausage and beans which Lucien hewed out of cans and cooked at meal times.

Pamela Brooke huddled, whitely, a transparent, desolated figure, in one of Ely's heavy mackinaws. She spoke seldom, and then quietly, except to the dog. Chinook had attached himself devotedly to her from the first hour. Lucien grimaced bitterly when the dog refused to follow him, but somewhere deep within him lurked a faint glow. Chinook had been his dog, not Ely's.

On the fourth day Lige tightened his snow shoes relentlessly. "I got to get back to my woman," he argued. "Mebbe I can get old Charlie Fishtail's squaw to shoe down here and chaperone you, Loosh—but I ain't goin' to stay another day. The crust holds—and it's likely to thaw and rot hell out of everything tomorrow. Old Mandy Fishtail is a right good cook, too, if you can keep her from spittin' on the griddle. That's what a feller needs in this country, a good, fat squaw that can swing an ax and butcher a beef and make good mash whisky. Ain't no place for queens to queen it in. That gal ought to go

back to London and board in Buckingham palace. It'll be April 'fore you can take her out in a pung. Wouldn't be so duberous for you if she was like some women—but a fish blooded stony faced critter like her—"

"You watch your lip, Lige! She belongs to Ely!"

"All right. Don't get hot about it."

When Lige had floundered away Lucien lingered about the barn till the swift, steely dark fell. Reluctantly he tramped to the door, between the dogged M and the laughing L. Within was warmth and light—to which men have for ages returned with gladness. But Lucien felt an alien, defensive aloofness. He opened the door reluctantly. He had composed a formal speech in the barn and he began it, doggedly, but Pamela Brooke cut him short.

"How long will this snow last, Mr. Mefford?" she asked quietly.

"This is January. We may have a thaw—and then the roads may be closed till April."

"Very well." She stepped from behind the table and lifted the coffee pot from the stove. "We will have supper now. It is ready."

"It is not necessary for you to cook."

"I shall do my part." He saw with amazement that she had dressed herself in some of Ely's clothes—an old pair of corduroy knickers, a flannel shirt, army puttees, and a sweater.

Lucien braced himself. "I may as well tell you. I am not pleasant to live with, like Ely. I can't talk—or sing or laugh—or dig up a tune like he could. I'm sorry—I'll try to make things as easy for you as I can. I've sent for an Indian woman. She ought to get down tomorrow."

Strange days—all alike as so many black crows sulking by. Icy, silent days, made of glaring, snow-blind mornings, pale frozen noons, and bitter nights. The pines about the house swayed and cracked like shot. A rabbit crept under the hemlock and died, rigidly, and Lucien hid it beneath a drift before he remembered that it no longer mattered to Ely how many little creatures froze and died in the woods.

He lay at night in the leanto, where the air was more bitter than death. At times he rose and tiptoed into the wide room to feed the fire, and only once did he look toward the western corner where Pamela Brooke slept under her furs in Ely's wooden bed. Only once, and then the sight of a lock of yellow hair lying loose on the worn beaver of the station agent's coat made his breath quicken, until he conquered the tremor with wrath.

Old Charlie Fishtail's squaw did not come. The cold settled, deeper, merciless. Coffee froze in the tin pot on the back of the stove of nights. And deeper and deeper the freezing sank into Lucien Mefford's soul. He walked, like a man of ice. He spoke, when rarely he uttered a sentence, with the cold, clipped thinness of icicles clipping off boughs of pine. Even Chinook moved away from him nervously and hung about the girl, his small eyes upturned in devotion. The girl was still, self-sufficient, proud. They moved about the house like two formal shadows, and sat at the red covered table with the warmth of the lamp between them, Lucien's eyes held doggedly upon his plate, Pamela Brooke's round chin lifted, her look level and undaunted.

A dumb devil brooded in Lucien's breast, sulky and dour, which he fostered, since by the unleavened poisons it brewed it slew strange, troubling thoughts which crept into his brain—slew them a most before they were born. Thoughts forgotten by the sight of white fingers under a light, by two chairs beside a glowing stove by the remembrance of that tress of yellow hair.

He nutrued this devil, for more and more he found his eyes seeing not the cold pride of Pamela's face but the soft curve of her cheek, the strong, sure movement of her white wrist, the still mothering look that lay always behind a cloudy barrier in her eyes. For so long there had been nobody—nobody but Ely. For so long the desert of his days had lain stark and arid under an unfriendly sky, uncomforted by rains, a mournful place where no flowers grew. The thing which was happening to Lucien was inevitable, but not knowing this he fought it with moods and surly silences and smolderings of tempor until at times lightning flashed in Pamela Brooke's eyes and her lips parted in anger before her cool inhibitions prevailed.

"I hate you!" she said to him one lowering morning. "I wonder if you know how utterly intolerable you are?"

"Thank you." His tone held an even scorn. "I know it very well."

"You seem to boast. Is it such an accomplishment to be a beast?"

"There are times when it is an accomplishment to be a beast." And Lucien, aching with a curious and

futile bewilderment, hardly knew how truly he spoke.

He tramped away, head down, every pulse jerking. When he returned at dusk she was sitting on the floor tinkering with Ely's worn old snowshoes.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"I think I shall learn to use these. One should know how to do everything. Isn't that true?"

"You'd last about a quarter of a mile," Lucien scoffed. "You're absolutely soft. The cold would get you in about 10 minutes."

"But ultimately I would last two quarters of a mile. Do you mind telling me which end of this thing is which?"

"Neither end is any good. Ely ruined them last winter following the log sleds down."

Her eyes clouded quickly. A twitch of pain clutched her lips, and she laid the warped old shoes down. It was as if she saw what Lucien was always seeing—a red head bent, eyes that laughed and dared, a laughing mouth, red cheeks—too red. The living, glowing Ely whom it seemed incredible could be lost to life. She had never wept. Her grief was frozen, inward turning, white. She sat stonily for very long, until Lucien relented.

"May I help you up?"

He could not remember when he had touched a woman's hand before.

The thaw had come with the waning of the moon. A sinister, rotting mildness undermined the snow heaps, making the paths, rivers and the woods a quagmire where even the rabbits sank ooily, leaving chill pools of black water in their tracks.

"If it freezes it's all right," said Lucien. But it did not freeze. Instead came fresh snow, loose and soft and clinging, lying on every twig and stem like a covering of baby fur. Lucien tramped down to the mill to look to the roof; returning at dark. He found an empty house, cold and dark. Pamela Brooke was gone.

As he followed the wide, awkward track of Ely's old snowshoes Lucien tried not to think. Out of the curious mire of his thoughts he chose one and clung to it because it was loyal and stupid and therefore safe. She was Ely's. He must bring her back because she was Ely's. Not for a white throat or soft hands or eyes that mothered and then somehow lighted a lamp and closed a shutter in his face. For Ely.

He found her a hundred yards from the house, thigh deep in a sodden drift, chilled and soaked, but undismayed.

"I find you are right," she said coolly. "I did not last a quarter of a mile. If you'll take these off my feet I think I can get out myself."

"Be still," ordered Lucien suddenly, his brows thunderous. "Take hold of my shoulders."

He gave her mustard tea and rather bad whisky when they returned to the house. "I apologize for everything," he said with difficulty. "Don't try to leave the house again."

She smiled faintly for the first time since she had come from Little Travois. "He told me you carried Ely—that swearing man. I didn't believe it then but I do now."

"I carried him, at the last—alone."

"Will you show me some time—where—"

"When the snow melts."

"Ah, but I shall be gone then."

At midnight came rain, sluicing down the roof, trickling in a black rill beneath the door. Lucien moved into the upper bunk in the leanto, and set his boots high off the earthen floor. It was then that he heard a call. For an instant he thought it was Ely calling again—"Loosh! Loosh!"

Then he knew it was Pamela Brooke. He leaped from the bunk, snatching on his outer clothes. In the flicker from the stove he saw her lying, very bright eyed, her hair tumbled, flame in her cheeks.

"Something seems to be wrong here." She wore a brave and ghastly shadow of a smile.

Lucien counted the wiry leap of her pulse, marked the rasp of her breathing. Instantly it seemed to him that the dreary weeks of winter were wiped away like frost on a pane. That this was Ely lying here grumbling at the pain in his gassed lung. He knew what to do. All the clutter of remedies, so futile with Ely, were still on the shelf. He brought them all out, mended the fire, opened the window wide.

"Cover your ears," he counseled. "We'll fight this with oxygen."

At dawn she was coughing with every breath, writhing a little with pain, biting her lips. Lucien made hot coffee and held her while she drank it, his arm thrilling under her shoulders. The clean part of her bright hair lay near to his lips and before he scarcely knew what he did a tingling madness fired him and he pressed his mouth hard against the soft gold of it. And at that moment Pamela Brooke lifted her eyes and looked into his face. What he saw in that look sent Lucien stumbling out to the hemlock tree, blind with a curious, monastic

self-condemnation. For the first time he owned to himself the sin of his own soul. He was a thief—coveting what was Ely's. And because he had seen a melting in Pamela Brooke's eyes he knew what manner of thief he was.

"God knows, Ely," he declared to the blackened, rain-washed mound, "I didn't want it to happen. God knows that." He fought the thing out in the dragging, hours that passed, fought it first with pretense. "This is Ely," he said to himself when Pamela Brooke burned with fever and fought for breath and he held her upright all night, with the old mackinaw of Ely's pinned under her chin. "This is Ely, sick. I've got to take care of Ely." He fought it with the old dumb stubbornness until the cruelty of it made him sick. Fever had made Pamela a babler. "Talk to me, Loosh," she pleaded constantly. "Tell me about him."

And so Lucien told over and over the anguished story of those two months after the grippe had found the weakened tissue in Ely's glassed lung. Every word, every whisper of Ely's she wanted, and Lucien chanted them as a tortured penitent might say a miserere, searching for absolution and finding it nowhere. But when the fever left her and she grew stronger he gave it up. He had been built four square, with both feet on the ground. Deception was not in him. He could not act, could not pretend. He came in from the mill and flung off his coat, standing forth very lithe and slender and stern, with black brows drawn down.

"The road is open," he said to Pamela Brooke. "In a week or two as soon as you are strong enough I'll take you down to Little Travois. They found old Charlie Fishtail's squaw under a drift—she's been frozen a long time, I guess. And you can't stay here—I guess you know—I care—to much."

She was still. Her eyes looked at him, mothered him, lighted a lamp, and so Lucien dared to believe—did not drawn down a baffling shutter to bar him out. Her lips grew gentle.

"But first," she said after a little, "you'll show me—where—"

The snow was gone when at last he took her out to the hemlock tree. She walked steadily, clad in Ely's old clothes, his puttees and boots, his mackinaw. They stood together for very long, while the barberry bush rustled its naked lacy branches vainly, boasting in a still little way the wood things have, of the feathery leaves it was weaving for those boughs. Then Pamela Brooke spoke. "Good-by, Ely."

She turned away, her hands in the pockets of the old mackinaw. Then she faced Lucien, a curious expression on her face. In her fingers she held a folded, soiled piece of paper.

"It was in the pocket."

"It's his handwriting, Ely's. He was pretty weak—see how it shakes." The handwriting was Ely's. Pencil, frail, wandering. But the script was decipherable, the signature unmistakable. This was Ely's testament scrawled on a scrap torn from a letter.

"I want Lucien Mefford to have everything that belongs to me."

"(Signed) ELY LUCAS."

"Everything that belongs to me."

The girl's voice was shaken. Lucien stood still, every nerve taut as frozen wires. Overhead a vagrant breeze, born in the south, stirred the hemlock till it sang. Lucien's blood leaped. Ely was digging up a tune, again. The world was good. Ah, the world was good. "Everything that belongs to me!" he repeated like a prayer.

She went away that day. Lige Walker drove her, grumbling, in the pung. Chinook, chained to a stake, yelped desolately and plunged at his collar. Lucien told her good-by at the door. They said little. There was so little to say, out of a world of words so few that were any use.

"I'll come down—after a little," Lucien stammered. "When it's summer will you let me come—Pamela?"

"When it's summer—Loosh."

The brief warmth of her fingers in his own; a blue, blue tenderness of eyes—and she was gone. But Lucien felt no emptiness of loss. He stood very straight in the fringed path between two grayish ribbons which were all that remained of the great snow barriers, and the glow of all the possessions of the earth was his.

He looked at the house, at the rusty tin letters whimsily tacked beside the door.

Ely had said that L. belonged in Love!

"Shut up, you fool," he said to the dog. "She's coming back."

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The compressed air shovel, which is taking the place of the old hand pick and shovel, weighs 23 pounds. Blows delivered in rapid succession to the upper end of the spade drive it rapidly into the earth, which may be then readily pried loose.