

The Girl Beyond the Trail

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SCARCELY had David sensed the girl's words of warning than he was on his feet. And now, when he saw her, he thanked God that his head was clear and that he could fight. Even yesterday, when she had stood before the fighting bears and he had fought Brokaw, she had not been whiter than she was now. Her face told him of their danger before he had seen it with his own eyes; it told him their peril was appallingly near, and there was no chance of escaping it. He saw, for the first time, that his bed on the ground had been close to the wall of an old cabin which was in a little dip in the face of the mountain.

Before he could take in more, or discover a visible sign of their enemies, Marge had caught his hand and was drawing him to the end of the shack. She did not speak as she pointed downward. At the edge of the valley, just beginning the ascent, were eight or ten men, and at that distance it was not difficult to make out Hauck and Brokaw.

David could not determine their exact number, for as he looked they were already disappearing under the face of a lower dip in the mountain. They were not more than four or five hundred yards away. It would take them a matter of twenty minutes to make the ascent to the cabin.

He looked at Marge. Despairingly she pointed to the mountain behind them. For a quarter of a mile it was a sheer wall of red sandstone. Their one way of flight lay downward, practically into the faces of their enemies.

"I was going to rouse you before it was light, Sakewawin," she explained, in a voice dead with hopelessness. "I kept awake for hours, and then I fell asleep. Baree awakened me, and now—it is too late."

"Yes, too late to run!" said David. A flash of fire leaped into her eyes. "You mean—"
"We can fight!" he cried. "Good God, Marge—if I only had my own gun now!" He thrust a hand into his pocket and drew forth the cartridges she had given him. "Thirty-twos! And only eleven of them! It's got to be short range for us. We can't put up a running fight, for they'd keep out of range of this little pea-shooter and fill me as full of holes as a sieve."

She was tugging at his arm. "The cabin, Sakewawin!" she exclaimed with sudden inspiration. "It has a strong bar at the door, and I remember the clay has fallen in places from between the logs, leaving openings through which you can shoot. We must take Tara and Baree in with us."

He was examining Nisikoo's rifle. "At a hundred and fifty yards it's good for a man," he said. "You get the beasts and the pack inside, Marge. I'm going to take a dilemma by the horns and eliminate two or three of our friends from this shoot-fest as they come up over that knoll down there. They won't be looking for bullets this early in the game, and I'll have them at an advantage. If I'm lucky enough to get Hauck and Brokaw—"

DAVID'S eyes had selected a big rock twenty yards from the cabin, from which he could overlook the slope to the first dip below them; and as Marge darted from him to get Tara and Baree into the cabin, he crouched behind the boulder and waited. He figured that it was not more than a hundred and fifty yards to the point where their pursuers would first appear, and he made up his mind that he would wait until they were nearer than that before he opened fire.

Not one of those eleven precious cartridges must be wasted, for he could count on Hauck's revolver only at close

quarters. It was no longer a time for doubt or indecision.

Marge led Tara into the cabin. Baree had crept up beside David, and lay flat on the ground close to the rock. A moment or two later the girl reappeared, ran across the narrow open space to David, and crouched down beside him.

"You must go into the cabin, Marge," he remonstrated.

"I'm going to stay with you, Sakewawin."

HER face was no longer white. Her eyes shone as she looked at him; and—she smiled. A child! His heart rose chokingly in his throat. Her face was close to his, and she whispered:

"Last night I kissed you, Sakewawin. I thought you were dying. Before you I have kissed Nisikoo; never any one else."

Why did she say that, with that wonderful glow in her eyes? Was it the death climbing up the mountain? Was it because she wanted him to know—before that? A child!

She whispered again: "And you—have never kissed me, Sakewawin. Why?"

His fingers relinquished their grip on the rifle. Slowly he drew her to him, until her head lay against his breast, her shining eyes and parted lips turned up to him, and he kissed her on the mouth, not once but a dozen times, and then held her back from him and looked into her face.

"Because—" he began, and stopped. Baree was growling. David peered down the slope.

"They are coming!" he said. "Marge, you must creep back to the cabin!"

"I am going to stay with you, Sakewawin. See, I will flatten myself out like this—with Baree."

She snuggled herself down against the rock, and again David peered from his ambush. Their pursuers were well over the crest of the dip, and he counted nine. They were advancing in a group,

and he saw that both Hauck and Brokaw were in the rear, and that they were using staffs in their toil upward, and did not carry rifles. The remaining seven were armed, and were headed by Langdon, who was fifteen or twenty yards ahead of his companions. David made up his mind quickly to take Langdon first, and to follow up with the others who carried rifles. Hauck and Brokaw, unarmed with guns, were the least dangerous just at present. He would get Brokaw with his fifth shot—the sixth if he made a miss with the fifth.

A thin strip of shale marked his hundred-yard dead-line, and the instant Langdon set his foot on this David fired. A fierce yell of defiance rang from David's lips as Langdon whirled in his tracks and pitched down among the men behind him. He rose up boldly from behind his rock and fired again. In that huddled and astonished mass he could not miss. A shriek came up to him. He fired a third time, and he heard a joyous cry of triumph beside him as their enemies rushed for safety toward the dip from which they had just climbed.

A fourth shot, and he picked out Brokaw. Twice he missed. His gun was empty when Brokaw lunged out of view. Langdon remained an inanimate blotch on the strip of shale. A few steps below him was a second body. A third man was dragging himself on hands and knees over the crest of the coulée.

Three—with six shots! And he had missed Brokaw! Inwardly David groaned as he caught the girl by an arm and hurried with her into the cabin, followed by Baree.

THEY were not a moment too soon. From over the edge of the coulée came a fusillade of shots from the heavy-caliber guns of the mountain men that sent out sparks of fire from the rock.

As he thrust the remaining five cartridges into the chamber of Nisikoo's rifle David looked about the cabin. In

one of the farther corners the huge grizzly sat on his quarters, as motionless as if stuffed. In the center of the single big room was an old box-stove partly fallen to pieces. That was all.

Marge had dropped the sapling bar across the door, and stood with her back against it. There was no window, and the closing of the door had shut out most of the light. He knew that she was breathing quickly, and the wonderful light that had come into her eyes was still glowing at him in the half gloom.

It gave him fresh confidence to see her standing like that, looking at him in that way, telling him without words that a thing had come into her life which had lifted her above fear. He went to her and took her in his arms again, and again he kissed her sweet mouth, and felt her heart beating against him.

A SPLINTERING crash sent him reeling to the center of the cabin with Marge in his arms. The crash had come simultaneously with the report of a rifle, and both saw where the bullet had entered through the door six inches above David's head, carrying a splinter as large as his arm with it. He had not thought of the door. It was the cabin's one vulnerable point, and he sprang out of fire with it as a second bullet crashed through and buried itself in the wall.

In the log walls were the open chinks that Marge had told him about; and David sprang to one of these apertures, wide enough to let the barrel of his rifle through, and looked in the direction from which the two shots had come. He was in time to catch a movement among the rocks on the side of the mountain a couple of hundred yards away, as a third shot tore its way through the door, glanced from the steel top of the stove, and struck two feet over Tara's back.

There were two men up there among the rocks, and their first shots were followed by a steady bombardment that fairly riddled the door. David could see their heads and shoulders and the gleam and faint puffs of their rifles; but he held his fire. Where were the other four, he

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"He saw Marge fighting in Brokaw's arms. Scream after scream came from the girl's lips: 'Tara! Tara! Tara!'"