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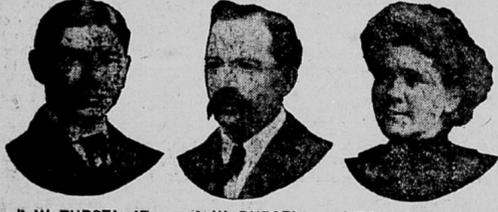
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**THE
BARRIER
BY
REX BEACH**

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"We will send Necla down to the mission tonight and let Father Barnum keep her there till this man goes," said the squaw after some deliberation.

"No; she must stay here," Gale replied, with decision. "The man has come here to live, so it won't do any good to send her away, and, after all, what is to be will be. But she must never be seen in that dance girl's dress again, at least not till I learn more about this Stark. It makes no difference whether this one is the man or not. He will come, and I shall know him. For a year I have felt that the time was growing short, and now I know it."

"No, no!" Alluna cried. "We have no strangers here. No white men except the soldiers and this one have come in a year. This is but a little trading post."

"It was yesterday, but it isn't today. Lee has made a strike, like the one George Carmack made on the Klondike. He came to tell me and Poleon, and we are going back with him tonight, but you must say nothing or it will start a stampede."

"Other men will come—a great many of them!" interjected Alluna fearfully, ignoring utterly the momentous news.

"Yes, Flambeau will be another Dawson if this find is what Lee thinks it is. I stayed away from the upper country because I knew crowds of men would come from the States, and I feared that he might be among them, but it's no use hiding any longer. There's no other place for us to go. If Lee has got a mine I'll have the one next to it, for we will be the first ones on the ground. What happens after that won't matter much. You four will be provided for. We are to leave in an hour, one at a time, to avoid comment."

"But why did this man stop here?" insisted the woman. "Why did he not stay on the steamboat and go to Dawson?"

"He's a friend of Lee's. He is going with us." Then he added, almost in a whisper, "Before we return I shall know."

Alluna seized his arm. "Promise to come back, John! Promise that you will come back even if this should be the man."

"I promise. Don't worry, little woman. I'm not ready for a reckoning yet."

As he turned away she laid her hand on his arm and said:

"If you do not know him he will not know you. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"Then the rest is easy."

But he only shook his head doubtfully and answered, "Perhaps; I am not sure," and went inside, where he made up a light pack of bacon, flour and tea, a pair of two, a coffee-pot and a frying pan, which he rolled inside a robe of rabbit skin and bound about in turn with a light tarpaulin. It did not weigh thirty pounds in all. Selecting a new pair of water boots, he stuffed dry grass inside them, oiled up his six shooter, then slipped out the back way and in five minutes was hidden in the thickets. Half an hour later, having completed a detour of

the town, he struck the trail to the interior, where he found Poleon Doret, equipped in a similar manner, resting beside a stream, singing the songs of his people.

When Burrell returned to his quarters he tried to mitigate the feeling of loneliness that oppressed him by tackling his neglected correspondence. Somehow today the sense of his isolation had come over him stronger than ever. His rank forbade any intimacy with his miserable handful of men, who had already fallen into the monotony of routine, while every friendly overture he made toward the citizens of Flambeau was met with distrust and coldness, his stripes of office seeming to erect a barrier and induce an ostracism stronger and more complete than if they had been emblems of the penitentiary. Even Doret and the trader seemed to share the general feeling; hence the thought of the long, lonesome winter approaching reduced the lieutenant to a state of black despondency, deepened by the knowledge that he now had an open enemy in camp in the person of Runnon. Then, too, he had taken a morbid dislike to the new man, Stark. So that all in all the youth felt he had good reason to be in the dumps this afternoon. There

was nothing desirable in this place—everything undesirable—except Necla. Her presence in Flambeau went far toward making his humdrum existence bearable, but of late he had found himself dwelling with growing seriousness on the unhappy circumstances of her birth and had almost made up his mind that it would be wise not to see her any more. The tempting vision of her in the ball dress remained vividly in his imagination, causing him hours of sweet torment. There was a sparkle, a fineness, a gentleness, about her that seemed to make the few women he had known well dull and commonplace, and even his sister, whom till now he had held as the perfection of all things feminine, suffered by comparison with this maiden of the frontier.

He was steeped in this sweet, grave melancholy when a knock came at his door, and he arose to find Necla waiting there, excited and radiant. She came in without sign of embarrassment or slightest consciousness of the possible impropriety of her act.

"The most wonderful thing has happened," she began at once when she found they were alone. "You'll faint for joy."

"What is it?"

"Lee has made a strike—a wonderful strike—richer than the Klondike I came as fast as I could, because tomorrow everybody will know about it and it will be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"For us to get in on it, of course. Oh, but won't there be a stampede! Why, all the people bound for Dawson on the next boat will pile off here. Then the news will go up river and down river, and thousands of others will come pouring in from everywhere, and this will be a city. Then we will stake our town lots and sell them for ever so much money and go around with our noses in the air."

"Hold on! Hold on!" said the soldier, stopping her breathless patter. "Tell me all about this."

"Well, 'No Creek' came in this morning to tell dad and Poleon. Then the boat arrived with an old friend of Lee's, a Mr. Stark, so Lee told him, too, and now they've all gone back to his creek to stake more claims. They slipped away quietly to prevent suspicion, but I knew there was something up from the way Poleon acted, so I made Alluna tell me all about it. They haven't more than two hours' start of us, and we can overtake them easily."

"Well, why are we not going?"

"Yes, we are," she insisted impatiently, "you and I. That's why I came, so you can get a mine for yourself and be a rich man, and so you can help me get one. I know the way. Hurry up!"

"No," said he in as firm a tone as he could command. "In the first place, these men don't like me, and they don't want me to share in this."

"What do you care?"

"In the second place, I'm not a miner. I don't know how to proceed."

"Never mind. I do. I've heard nothing but mining all my life."

"In the third place, I don't think I have the right, for I'm a soldier. I'm working for Uncle Sam, and I don't believe I ought to take up mining claims. I'm not sure there is anything to prevent it, but neither am I sure it would be quite the square thing. Are you?"

"Why, of course it's all right," said Necla, her eager face clouding with the look of a hurt child. "If you don't do it somebody else will."

But the lieutenant shook his head. "Maybe I'm foolish, but I can't see my way clear, much as I would like to."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" she exclaimed brokenly. "I do so want to go. I want you to be rich, and I want to be rich myself. I want to be a fine lady and go outside and live like other girls. Why, it means heaven to a girl like me. Her eyes were wet with the sudden dashing of her hopes, and her chin quivered in a sweet, girlish way that made the youth almost surrender on the instant.

"We couldn't possibly overtake them if we tried," he said, as if willing to treat with his conscience.

"No, but we could beat them in. I know where Lee is working, for I went up last winter with Constantine and his dog team over a short cut by way of Black Bear creek. You see, his creek makes a great bend to the southward and heads back toward the river, so by crossing the divide at the source of Black Bear you drop into it a few miles above his cabin."

While she made this appeal Burrell fought with himself. There were reasons why he longed to take this trip more than he had longed for anything since boyhood. These men of Flambeau had disregarded him and insisted on treating him with contemptuous distrust despite his repeated friendly overtures, wherefore he was hungry to beat them at their own game, hungry to thrust himself ahead of them and compel them to reckon with him as an equal, preferring a state of open enmity if necessary to this condition of indifferent toleration. Moreover, he knew that Necla was coveted by half of them, and if he spent a night in the woods alone with her it would stir them up a bit, he fancied. By heaven, that would make them sit up and notice him! But, then, it might work a wonder upon her. And yet would it? He was not so sure that it would. She had come to him, she was old enough to know her mind, and she was but a half breed girl, after all, who doubtless was not so simple as she seemed. Other men had no such scruples in this or any other land, and yet the young man hesitated until, encouraged by his sol-

lence, the girl came forward and spoke again impulsively:

"Don't be silly, Mr. Burrell. Come! Please come with me, won't you?"

She took him by the edges of his coat and drew him to her coaxingly. It may have been partly the spirit of revolt that had been growing in him all day, or it may have been wholly the sense of her there beside him, warm and pleading, but something caused a great wave to surge up through his veins, caused him to take her in his arms, fiercely kissing her upturned face again and again, crying softly, deep down in his throat:

"Yes, yes, yes! You little witch! I'll go anywhere with you! Anywhere! Anywhere!" The impulse was blind and ungovernable, and it grew as his lips met hers, while, strangely enough, she made no resistance, yielding herself quietly till he found her arms would softly about his neck and her face nestling close to his. Neither of them knew how long they stood thus blended together, but soon he grew conscious of the beating of her heart against his breast as she lay there like a little fluttering bird and felt the throbbing of his own heart swaying him. Her arms, her lips and her whole body clung to his in a sweet surrender, and yet there was nothing immodest or unmaidenly about it, for his strength and ardor had lifted her and drawn her to him as on the sweep of a great wave.

She drew her face free and hid it against his neck, breathing softly and with shy timidity, as if the sound of the words she whispered half frightened her.

"I love you. I love you, Meade."

It may happen that a man will spend months in friendly and charming intimacy with a woman and never feel the violence or tenderness of passion till there comes a psychic moment or a physical touch that suddenly inwraps them like a flame. So it was with Burrell. The sweet burden of this girl in his arms, the sense of her yielding lips, the warmth of her caressing hands, momentarily unleashed a leaping pack of mad desires, and it was she who finally drew herself away to remind him smilingly that he was wasting time.

"My lips will be here when those mines are worked out," she said. "No, no!" And she held him off as he came toward her again, insisting that if they were going they must be off at once and that he could have no more kisses for the present. "But, of course, it is a long trip, and we will have to sit down now and then to rest," she added shyly, at which he vowed that he was far from strong and could not walk but a little way at a time, yet, even so, he declared, the trail would be too short, even though it led to Canada.

"Then get your pack made up," she ordered, "for we must be well up toward the head of Black Bear creek before it grows dark enough to camp."

Swiftly he made his preparations. A madman was upon him now, and he took no pains to check or analyze the reasons for his decision. The thought of her loveliness in his arms once more far up among the perfumed wooded heights as the silent darkness stole upon them stirred in him such a fret to be gone that it was like a fever. He slipped away to the barracks with instructions for his corporal, but was back again in a moment. Finally he took up his burden of blanket and food, then said to her:

"Well, are you ready, little one?"

"Yes, Meade," she answered simply. "And you are sure you won't regret it?"

"Not while you love me."

He kissed her again before they stepped out on the river trail that wound along the bank.

Two hours later they paused where the foaming waters of Black Bear creek rioted down across a graveled bar and into the silent, sweeping river, standing at the entrance to a wooded, grass grown valley, with rolling hills and domes displayed at its head, while back of them lay the town, six miles away, its low, squat buildings tiny and toylike, but distinctly silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Is it not time to rest?" said the soldier laughingly, yet with a look of yearning in his misty eyes as he took the girlish figure in his arms. But she only smiled up at him and, releasing his hold, led the way into the forest.

(To be Continued.)

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Wanted—Bell boys at Pilgrim hotel. Will pay good wages to reliable boys.

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