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THE COURAGE OF MARGE O'DOONE

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Her voice broke in a gasp that was like a sob. He struggled to rise; stood swaying before her, his legs unsteady as stilts under him. My gun, Marge—my pistol! he demanded, trying to reach out his arms. "If I had them now—on them," she interrupted. "But I have Nisikoo's rifle, Sakewawin! Oh—I must hurry!"

GALLEY TWENTY-ONE
They won't come to my room, and Marcees is perhaps dead. As soon as it is dark I will unlock your door. And if one of them comes before then, you must kill him! You must! You must!

She backed to the door, and now she opened it, and was gone. A key clicked in the lock again, he heard her swift footsteps in the hall, and a second door opened and closed over her. For a few minutes he stood without moving, a little dazed by the suddenness with which she had left him. She had not been in his room more than a minute or two. She had been terribly frightened, terribly afraid of discovery before her work was done. On the floor at his feet lay the knife. That was why she had come, that was what she had brought him! His blood began to tingle. He could feel it returning its course through his numb legs and arms, and he started slowly, half afraid that he would lose his balance, and picked up the weapon. The chanting of Wapi and his people was only a distant murmur; through the high window came the sound of returning voices—voices of white men.

There swept through him the wild thrill of the thought that once more the light was up to him. Marge O'Doone had done her part. She had struck down the Indian woman Hauck placed over her as a guard—had escaped from her room, unbound him, and put a knife into his hands. The rest was his fight. How long before Brokaw or Hauck would come? Would they give him time to get the blood running through his body again? Time to gain strength? To use his freedom—and the knife? He began walking slowly across the room, pumping his arms up and down. His strength returned quickly. He went to the table and drank deeply with a consuming thirst. The water refreshed him, and he paced back and forth more and more swiftly, until he was breathing steadily and he could harden his muscles and knock his fists. He looked at the knife. It was a horrible necessity—the burying of that steel in a man's back, or his heart. Was there no other way, he wondered? He began searching the room. Why hadn't Marge brought him a club instead of a knife, or at least a club along with the knife? To club a man down when he was intent on murder, wasn't like letting out his life in a gush of blood.

His eyes rested on the table, and in a moment he had turned it over and was wrenching at one of the wooden legs. It broke off with a sharp snap, and he held in his hand a weapon possessing many advantages over the knife. The latter he thrust into his belt with the handle just back of his hip. Then he yawned. It was not long. The western mountains had shut out the last reflections of the sun. Gloom was beginning to fill his room, and he numbered the minutes as he stood with his ear close to the door, listening for a step, hopeful that it would be the Girl's and not Hauck's or Brokaw's. At last the step came, advancing from the end of the hall. It was a heavy step, and he drew a deep breath and gripped the club. His heart gave a sudden, mighty throb as the step stopped at his door. It was not pleasant to think of what he was about to do, and yet he realized, as he heard the key in the lock, that it was a grim and terrible necessity. He was thankful there was only one. He would not strike too hard—not in this cowardly way—from ambush. Just enough to do the business sufficiently well. It would be easy. He raised his club in the thickening dusk, and held his breath. The door opened, and Hauck entered, and stood with his back to David. Horrible! Strike a man like that—and with a club! If he could use his hands, choke him, give him at least a quarter chance. But it had to be done. It was a sickening thing. Hauck went down without a groan—so silently, so lifelessly that David thought he had killed him. He knelt beside him for a few seconds and made sure that his heart was beating before he rose to his feet. He looked out into the hall. The lamps had not been lighted—probably that was one of the old Indian woman's duties. From the big room came a sound of voices—and then, close to him, from the door across the way, there came a small trembling voice: "Hurry, Sakewawin! Lock the door—and come!"

For another instant he dropped on his knees at Hauck's side. Yes it was there—in his pocket—a revolver! He possessed himself of the weapon with an exclamation of joy, locked the door, and ran across the hall. The Girl opened her door for him, and he closed it behind him as he sprang into her room. The first object he noticed was the Indian woman. She was lying on a cot, and her black eyes were levelled at them like the eyes of a snake. She was trussed up so securely, and was gagged so thoroughly that she could not restrain a laugh as he bent over her. "Splendid!" he cried softly. "You're a little brick, Marge—you surely are! And now—what?"

With his revolver in his hand, and the Girl trembling under his arm, he felt a ridiculous desire to shout out at the top of his voice to his enemies letting them know that he was again ready to fight. In the gloom the Girl's eyes shone like stars. "Who—was it?" she whispered. "Hauck." "Then it was Brokaw who went

with Wapi. Langdon and Henry went with him. It is less than two miles to the lake, and they will be returning soon. We must hurry! Look—it is growing dark!"

She ran from his arms to the window and he followed her. "In—fifteen minutes—we will go, Sakewawin. Tara is out there in the edge of the spruce." Her hand pinched his arm. "Did you—kill him?" she breathed. "No. I broke off a leg from the table and stunned him." "I'm glad," she said, and smuggled close to him shiveringly. "I'm glad, Sakewawin."

In the darkness that was gathering about them it was impossible for him not to take her in his arms. He held her close, bowing his head so that for an instant her warm face touched his own; and in those moments while they waited for the gloom to thicken he told her in a low voice what he had learned from Brokaw. She grew tense against him as he continued, and when he assured her he no longer had a doubt her mother was alive, and that she was the woman he had met on the coast, a cry rose out of her breast. She tried to speak when her loud footsteps in the hall made her catch her breath, and her fingers clung more tightly to his shoulders. "It is time," she whispered. "We must go!"

She ran from him quickly and from under the cot where the Indian lay dragged forth a pack. He could not see plainly what she was doing now. In a moment she had put a rifle in his hands. "It belonged to Nisikoo's," she said. "There are six shots in it, and here are all the cartridges I have." He took them in his hand and counted them as he dropped them into his pocket. There were eleven in all, "Thirty-two's," he thought, as he sized them up with his fingers. "Good men!" He said aloud: "If we could get my rifle, Marge..."

"They have taken it," she told him again. "But we shall not need it, Sakewawin," she added, as if his mind; "I know of a mountain that is all rock—not so far off as the one you reached, if they will not be able to trail us. If they should find us..." She was opening the window. "What then?" he asked. "Nisikoo's once killed a bear with that gun," she replied. The window was open, and she was waiting. They thrust out their heads and listened. When he had assured himself that all was clear he dropped out the pack. He lifted Marge down then and followed her. As his feet struck the ground the slight shock wrung a pain through his head that he could not cry from him, and for a moment he leaned with his back against the wall, almost overcome again by the sickening dizziness. It was not so dark that the Girl did not see the sudden change in him. Her eyes were wide with alarm.

"A little dizzy," he explained, trying to smile at her. "They gave me a pretty hard crack on the head, Marge. This air will set me right-son." He picked up the pack and followed her. In the edge of the spruce a hundred yards from the Nest, Tara had been lying all the afternoon, nursing his wounds. "I could see him from my window," whispered Marge. She went straight to him and began talking to him in a low voice. Out of the darkness behind Tara came a growl. "Baree, by thunder!" muttered David in amazement. "He's made up with the bear, Marge! What do you think of that?"

At the sound of his voice Baree came to him and flattened himself at his feet. David laid a hand on his head. "Boy!" he whispered softly. "And they said you were an outlaw, and would join the wolves." He saw the dark bulk of Tara rising out of the gloom, and the Girl was at his side. "We are ready, Sakewawin." He spoke to her thought that had been shaping itself in his mind. "Why wouldn't it be better to join Wapi and his Indians?" he asked, remembering Brokaw's words. "Because—they are afraid of Hauck," she replied quickly. "There is but one way, Sakewawin—to follow a narrow trail Tara and I have made close to the foot of the range, until we come to the rock mountain. Shall we risk the bundle on Tara's back?" "It is light. I will carry it." "Then give me your hand, Sakewawin."

ing to walk steadily at her side, his own voice sounding unreal and at a great distance from him. "You see—my child—I didn't have anything to love but your picture." What a fool he was to try and make himself heard above the roaring in his head! His words seemed to him whisps coming across a great space. And the bundle on his shoulders was like crushing weight bearing him down! The voice at his side was growing fainter. It was saying things which afterward he could not remember, but he knew that it was talking about the woman he had said was her mother, and that he was answering it while weights of lead were dragging at his feet. Then suddenly, he had stepped over the edge of the world and was floating in that vast black chaos again. The voice did not leave him. He could hear it sobbing, entreating which he could not understand; and when at last he began to comprehend it he knew also that he was no longer walking with weights at his feet and a burden on his shoulders, but was on the ground. His head was on her breast, and she was no longer speaking to him, but was crying like a child with a heart utterly broken. The deadly sickness was gone as quickly as it had stricken him, and he struggled upward, with her arms helping him.

"You are hurt—hurt—" he heard her moaning. "If I can only get you on Tara, Sakewawin, on Tara's back—there—a step..." and he knew that was what she had been saying over and over again, urging him to help himself if he could, so that she could get him to Tara. He reached out his hand and buried it in the thick hair of the grizzly, and he tried to speak laughingly so that she would not know his fears. "One is often dizzy—like that—after a blow," he said. "I guess—I can walk now."

"No, no, you must ride Tara," she insisted. "You are hurt—and you must ride Tara, Sakewawin. You must!" She was lifting at his arms with all her strength, her breath hot and panting in his face, and Tara stood with out moving a muscle of his giant body, as if he, too, were urging upon him in this dumb manner the necessity of obeying his mistress. Even then David would have been remonstrated but he felt once more that sickness creeping over him, and he raised himself slowly, as the grizzly's broad back. The girl picked up the bundle and rifle and Tara followed her through the darkness. To David the bear's great back seemed a wonderfully safe and comfortable place, and he leaned forward with his fingers clutched deeply in the long hair of the ruff about the bear's bulging shoulders. The girl called back to him softly: "You are all right, Sakewawin?" "Yes, it is so comfortable that I feel I may fall asleep," he replied. Out in the starlight she would have seen his drooping head, and his words would have had a different meaning for her. He was fighting with him-

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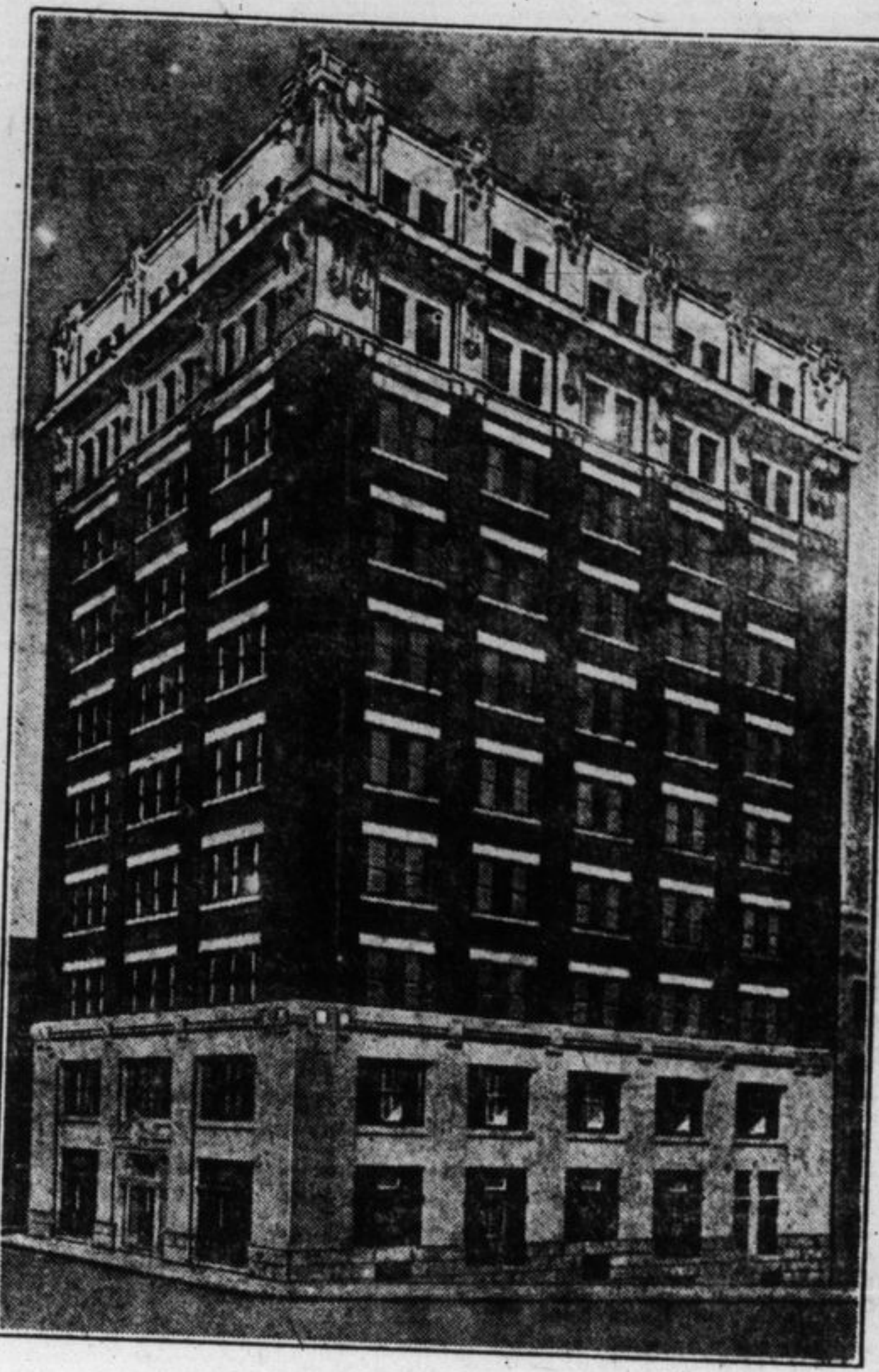
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self desperately, and in his heart was a great fear. He must be badly hurt, he thought. There came to him a dim, but vivid vision of an Indian hurt in the head, whom he and Father Roland had tried to save. Without a surgeon it had been impossible. The Indian had died, and he had had those same spells of sickness, the sickness that was creeping over him again in spite of his efforts to fight it off. He had no very clear notion of the movement of Tara's body under on grimly, and that every little while the Girl called back to him, and he replied. Then came the time when he failed to answer, and for a space the rocking motion under him ceased and the Girl's voice was very near to him. Afterward motion resumed. It seemed to him that he was travelling a great distance. Altogether too far without a halt for sleep, or at least a rest. He was conscious of a desire to voice protest—and all the time his fingers were clasped in Tara's mane in a sort of death grip.

In her breast Marge's heart was beating like a hunted thing, and over and over again she sobbed out a broken prayer as she guided Tara and his burden through the night. From the forest into the starlit open; from the open into the thick gloom of forest again—into and out of starlight and darkness, following that trail down the valley. She was no longer thinking of the rock mountain, for it would be impossible now to climb over the range into the other valley. She was heading for a cabin. An old and abandoned cabin, where they could hide. She tried to tell David about it, many days after they had begun that journey it seemed to him.

"Only a little longer, Sakewawin," she cried, with her arm about him and her lips close to his bent head. "Only a little longer! They will not think to search for us there, and you can sleep—sleep"

Her voice drifted away from him like a low murmur in the tree tops—and his fingers still clung in that death-grip in the mane at Tara's neck. And still many other days later they came to the cabin. It was amazing to him that the Girl should say: (To Be Continued.)

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