

NORTHERN LIGHTS

By GILBERT PARKER

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THE STAKE AND PLUMB LINE

She went against all good judgment in marrying him; she cut herself off from her own people, from the life in which she had been an alluring and beautiful figure.

The step she took was to marry Jim Templeton, the drunken, cast-off son of a millionaire senator from Kentucky, who controlled railways and owned a bank, and had so resented his son's inebriate habits that for five years he had never permitted Jim's name to be mentioned in his presence. Jim had twenty thousand dollars left him by his mother, and a small income of three hundred dollars from an investment which had been made for him when a little boy. And this had carried him on; for, drunken as he was, he had some sense, and he had money, limiting himself to three thousand a year. He had four thousand dollars left, and his tiny income of three hundred—when he went to Sally Seabrook, after having been sober for a month, and begged her to marry him.

When Sally was fifteen and he twenty-two, he had fallen in love with her and she with him; and nothing had broken the early romance. He had captured her young imagination, and had fastened his image on her heart. Her people, seeing the drift of things, had sent her to a school on the Hudson, and the two did not meet for some time. Then came a stolen interview, and a fastening of the rivets of attraction—for Jim had gifts of a wonderful kind. He was also a lawyer, and was junior attorney to his father's great business.

In the early days of their association Jim had left his post and taken to drink at critical moments in her operations. At first, high words had been spoken, then there came the strife of two dissimilar natures, and both were unrelenting in his own way. Then, at last, had come the separation, irrevocable and painful; and Jim had flung out into the world a drunkard, who, sober for a fortnight, or a month, or three months, would afterward go off on a spree. Society had ceased to recognize him for a long time, and he did not seek it.

In one of his sober intervals he had met Sally Seabrook in the street. It was the first time in four years, for he had avoided her, and though she had written to him once or twice, he had never answered her—shame was in his heart. Yet all the time the old answer was in Sally's ears.

So when she and Jim met in the street, the old, true thing rushed upon them both, and for a moment they stood still and looked at each other. That was the beginning of the new epoch. A few days later Jim came to her and said that she alone could save him; and she meant him to say it, had led him to the saying, for the same conviction was burned deep in her own soul. She knew the awful risk she was taking, that the state must mean social ostracism, and that her own people would be no kinder to her than society; but she gasped a prayer, smiled at Jim as though all were well, laid her plans, made him promise her one thing on his knees, and took the plunge.

Her people did as she expected. She was threatened with banishment from heart and home—with dishonour; but she pursued her course. And, standing at the altar, Jim's eyes were still wet, with new tears in his heart and a being at his side meant for the best man in the world. As he knelt beside her, awaiting the benediction, a sudden sense of the enormity of his act came upon him, and for her sake he would have drawn a sack then, had it not been too late.

But the thing was done, and a new life was begun. Before they had launched upon it, however, before society had fully grasped the sensation, or they had left upon their journey to northern Canada, where Sally intended they should work out their problem and make their home, far and free from all old associations, a curious thing happened. Jim's father sent an urgent message to Sally to come to him.

"Why have you done it?" he said. "You—you knew all about him; you might have married the best man in the country. You could rule a kingdom; you have beauty and power, and make people do what you want; and you've got a son."

"He is your son," she answered quietly. "He was my son—when he was a man," he retorted grimly. "He is the son of the woman you once loved," she answered.

The old man turned his head away. "What would she have said to what you did to Jim?"

He drew himself around sharply. Her dagger had gone home, but he would not let her know it. "Leave her out of the question—she was a saint," he said, roughly.

"She cannot be left out; nor can you. He got his temperament naturally; he inherited his weakness. From your grandfather, from her father. Do you think you are in no way responsible?"

He was silent for a moment, but then said, stubbornly: "Why—why have you done it? What's between him and me can't be helped; we are father and son;

but you—you had no call, no responsibility."

"I loved Jim. I always loved him, ever since I can remember, as you did. I see my way ahead. I will not desert him. No one cares what happens to him, no one but me. Your love wouldn't stand the test; mine will."

"I have ambition," she continued. "No girl was ever more ambitious, but my ambition is to make the most and best of my life. Power?—it shall be as it must be; but Jim and I will work for it to fulfill ourselves. For me—ah, if I can save him—and I mean to do so!—do you think that I would not then have my money—my money—power, and to rule; and these are to you the best things in the world. I make my choice differently, though I would have these other things if I could; and hope I shall."

But Jim flung to her and there she stood, Jim's wife, your son, Jim—my husband, Jim!"

The old man got to his feet slowly. She had him at bay. "But you are great," he said, "great! It is an awful stake—awful! Yet, if you win, you'll have what money can't buy. And listen to me. We'll make the stake bigger. It will give it point, too, in another way. If you keep Jim sober for four years from the day of your marriage, on the last day of that four years I'll put in your hands for you and him, or for your child—if you have one—five millions of dollars. I am a man of my word. While Jim drinks I won't take him back; he's disinherited. I'll give him nothing now or hereafter. Save him for four years—if he can do it, he will do it—and there's five millions as sure as the sun's in heaven. Amen and amen."

Society had its sensation, and then the veil dropped. For a long time none looked behind it except Jim's father. He had too much at stake not to have his telescope upon them. A detective followed them to keep Jim's record. But this they did not know.

From the day they left Washington Jim put his life and his fate in his wife's hands. He meant to follow her judgment, and, self-willed and strong in intellect as he was, he said that she should have a fair chance of fulfilling her purpose.

So, as they drew into the great Saskatchewan Valley, her hand in his and eyes on his, and there came the strife of two dissimilar natures, and both were unrelenting in his own way. Then, at last, had come the separation, irrevocable and painful; and Jim had flung out into the world a drunkard, who, sober for a fortnight, or a month, or three months, would afterward go off on a spree. Society had ceased to recognize him for a long time, and he did not seek it.

In time it was found that the troop never had a better disciplinarian than Jim. He knew when to shut his eyes, and when to keep them open. To non-essentials he kept his eyes shut; to essentials he kept them very wide open. There were some men of good birth from England and elsewhere among these men, and they mostly understood Jim first. But they all understood Sally from the beginning, and after a little they were glad enough to come, on occasion, to the five-roomed little house near the barracks, and hear her talk, then answer her questions, as men had done at Washington, open out their hearts to her. They noticed, however, that while she made them barley-water, and all kinds of soft drinks from citric acid, sarsaparilla, and the like, she had one special drink of her own invention, which she called cream-nectar, no spirits were to be had. They also noticed that Jim never drank a drop of liquor, and by-and-by, one

way or another, they got a glimmer of the real truth, before it became known who he really was for anything of his history. And the interest in the two and in Jim's reformation, spread through the country, while Jim gained reputation as the smartest man in the force.

On the day that Jim became a lieutenant his family increased by one. It was a girl, and they called her Nancy, after Jim's mother. It was the anniversary of their marriage, and, so far, Jim had won with what fightings and stragglings and wrastlings of the spirit only Sally and himself knew. And she knew as well as he, and always saw the storm coming, before it broke—a restlessness, then a moodiness, then a hungry, eager, helpless look, and afterward an agony of longing, a feverish desire to break away and get the thrilling thing which would still the demon within him.

So the first and so the second and third years passed in safety. The baby had done much to brace her faith in the future and comfort her anxious present. The child had intelligence of a rare order. She had drawn to her the roughest men in the troop, and for old Sewell, the grim sergeant, she had a specially warm place.

"You can love me if you like," she had said to him at the very start, with the egotism of childhood; but made haste to add, "because I love you, Gri-Gri." She called him Gri-Gri from the first, but they knew only long after.

He paused reflectively. "It's strange that this life up here makes you feel that you must live a bigger life still, that this is only the wide porch to the great labor-house—it makes you want to do things. Well, we've got to win the stake first," he added, with a laugh.

"The stake is a big one, Jim—bigger than you think." He did not know that he was playing for a certain five millions, perhaps fifty millions, of dollars. She had never told him of his father's offer. He was fighting only for salvation, for those he loved, for freedom. As they stood there, the conviction had come upon her that they had come to the last battle-field, that this journey which Jim now must take would decide all, would give them perfect peace or lifelong pain. The shadow of battle was over them, but he had no foreboding, no premonition; he had never been so full of spirits and life.

To her admiration Jim replied by burying his face in her golden hair, and he whispered: "Say, I've done nearly four years, my girl. I think I'm all right now—I think. This last six months, it's been easy—pretty fairly easy."

"Four months more, only four months more—God be good to us!" she said, with a little gasp. If he held out for four months more, the first great stage in their life-journey would be passed, the stake won.

There came a knock at the door, and presently Sewell entered. "The Commissioner wishes you to come over, sir," he said. "I was just coming, Sewell. Is all ready for the start?"

"Everything's ready, sir, but

speech, powerful with a people who had the gift of imagination. Arrowhead was a chief whose will had never been crossed by his own people, and to master that will by a superior will, to hold back the destructive force of the ignorant minds of the braves, was only a natural force of defence, meant a task needing more than authority behind it. For the very fear of that authority put in motion was an incentive to present resistance—

The faces that surrounded Jim were thin with hunger, and the murder that had been committed by the chief had, as its origin, the foolish repies of the Hudson Bay Company's men to their demands for supplies. Arrowhead had killed him with his own hand.

But Jim Templeton was of a different calibre. Although he had not been told it, he realized that, indirectly, hunger was the cause of the crime and might easily become the cause for another; for their tempers were sharper even than their appetites. Upon this he played; upon this he made an exhortation to the chief. He assumed that Arrowhead had become violent because of his people's straits, that Arrowhead's heart yearned for his people and would make sacrifice for them. Now, if Arrowhead came quietly, he would see that supplies of food were sent at once, and that arrangements were made to meet the misery of their situation. Therefore, if Arrowhead came freely, he would have so much in his favor before his judges; if he would not come quietly, then he must be brought by force; and if they raised a hand to prevent it, then destruction would fall upon all—save the women and children. The law must be obeyed. They might try to resist the law through him, but, if violence was shown, he would first kill Arrowhead, and then destruction would descend like a wind out of the north, darkness would swallow them, and their bones would cover the plains.

Jim made his great effort, and not without avail. Arrowhead

rose slowly, the cloud gone out of his face, and spoke to his people, bidding them wait in peace until peace came, and appointing his son chief in his stead until his return.

"The white man speaks truth, and I will do it," he said. "I shall return," he continued, "if it be written so upon the leaves of the Tree of Life; and if it be not so written, I shall fade like a mist, and the tepees will know me not again. The white man is master—if he wills it we shall die; if he wills it we shall live. And this was ever so. If it is written on the leaves of the Tree of Life that the white man rule us forever, then it shall be so. I have spoken. Now, behold, I go."

Jim had conquered, and together they sped away with the dogs through the sweet-smelling spruce woods where every branch carried a cloth of white, and the only sound heard was the swish of a blanket of snow as it fell to the ground from the wide webs of green, or a twig snapped under the load it bore. Peace brooded in the silent and comforting forest, and Jim and Arrowhead, the Indian ever ahead, swung along, mile after mile, on their snowshoes, emerging at last upon the wide, white prairie.

A hundred miles of sun and fair weather, sleeping at night in the open in a trench dug in the snow, no fear in the thoughts of Jim, nor evil in the heart of the heathen man.

One hundred miles of sun and fair weather, and then fifty miles of bitter, aching cold, with nights of peril from the increasing chill, so that Jim dared not sleep lest he should never wake again, but die hunched and exhausted! Yet

Arrowhead slept through all. Day after day so, and then ten miles of storm such as come only to the vast barrens of the northlands; and woe to the traveller upon whom the icy wind and the blinding snow descended! Woe came upon Jim Templeton and Arrowhead, the heathen.

In the awful struggle between man and nature that followed, the captive became the leader. The craft of the plains, the inherent instinct, the feeling which was more than eyesight became the only hope. One whole day to cover ten miles—an endless path of agony, in which Jim went down again and again, but came up blinded by snow and drift, and out as with lashes by the angry wind. At the end of the ten miles was a Hudson Bay Company's post and safety; and through ten hours had they struggled toward it, going off at tangents, circling on their own tracks; but the Indian, by an instinct as sure as the needle to the pole, getting the direction to the post again, in the moments of direst peril and uncertainty.

How Arrowhead found the post in the mad storm he could never have told. Yet, as he came up with Jim unconscious on the sleds and with limbs frozen, all the dogs gone but two, the leathers over the Indian's shoulders as he fell against the gate of the post with a shrill cry that roused the factor and his people, to go together with Sergeant Sewell, had been sent out from headquarters to await Jim's arrival there. It was Sewell's hand which first felt Jim's heart and pulse, and found that there was still life left, even before it could be done by the doctor from headquarters, who had come to visit a sick man at the post.

For hours they worked with snow upon the frozen limbs to bring back life and consciousness. Consciousness came at last with a half delirium, half understanding; as, emerging from the passing sleep of anaesthetics, the eye sees things and dimly registers them before the brain has set them in any relation to life or comprehension.

But Jim was roused at last, and the doctor presently held to his lips a glass of brandy. Then from infinite distance Jim's understanding returned; the mind emerged, but not wholly, from the chaos in which it was travelling. His eyes stood out in eagerness.

"Brandy! brandy!" he said, hungrily. With an oath Sewell snatched the glass from the doctor's hand, put it on the table, then stooped to Jim's ear and said, hoarsely: "Remember—Nancy. For God's sake, sir, don't drink the fierce light went out of his eyes, the face became grayer and sharper. "Sally—Nancy—Nancy," he whispered, and his fingers clutched vaguely at the quilt.

"He must have brandy or he will die. The system is pumped out. He must be revived," said the doctor. He reached again for the glass of spirits.

Jim understood now. He was on the borderland between life and death; his feet were at the brink. "No—not—brandy, no!" he moaned.

"Quick, the broth!" said Sewell to the factor, who had been preparing it. "Quick, while there's a chance." He stooped and called into Jim's ear: "For the love of God, wake up, the broth is coming, they're both coming, Nancy's coming. They'll soon be here." What matter that he lied?—a life was at stake.

Jim's eyes opened again. The doctor was standing with the brandy in his hand. Half madly Jim reached out. "Give it to me until they come," he cried; "the brandy—ah, give it! Give it—ah, no, no, I must not," he added, gasping, his lips trembling, his hands shaking.

Sewell laid the broth to his lips. He drank a little, yet his face became grayer and grayer; a bluish tinge spread about his mouth.

Presently as they watched him the doctor said: "It will not do. He must have brandy. It has life food in it."

Jim understood the words. He knew that if he drank the brandy the chances against his future were terrible, and he must keep it. Yet the thirst was on him; his enemy had him by the throat again, was dragging him down. But in the extremity of his strength his mind fought on—fought on, growing weaker every moment. He was having his last fight. They watched him with an aching anxiety, and there was anger in the doctor's face. He had no patience with these forces arrayed against him.

At last the doctor whispered to Sewell: "It's no use; he must have the brandy, or he can't live an hour."

Suddenly there appeared at the bedside Arrowhead, gaunt and weak, his face swollen, the skin of it broken by the whips of storm. "He is my brother," he said, and, stooping, laid both hands, which he had held before the fire for a long time, on Jim's head. "Take his feet, his hands, his legs, and his head in your hands," he said to them all. "Life is in us; we will give him life."

He knelt down and kept both hands on Jim's heart, while the others, even the doctor, stood by his act, did as they were bidden. "Shut your eyes. Let your life go into him. Think of him, and him alone. Now!" said Arrowhead, in a strange voice. He murmured, and continuing to

murmuring, his body drawing closer and closer to Jim's body, while in the deep silence, broken only by the chanting of his low, monotonous voice, the others pressed Jim's hands and head and feet and legs—six men under the command of a heathen murderer.

The minutes passed. The color came back to Jim's face, the skin of his hands filled up, they ceased twitching, his pulse got stronger, his eyes opened with a new light in them.

"I'm living, anyhow," he said, at last, with a faint smile. "I'm hungry—broth, please."

The fight was won, and Arrowhead, the pagan murderer, drew over to the fire and crouched down beside it, his back to the bed, impassive and still as life.

As the light came in at the windows, Sewell touched him on the shoulder and said: "He is sleeping now."

"I hear my brother breathe," answered Arrowhead. "He will live."

All night he had listened, and had heard Jim's breath as only a man who has lived in waste places can hear. "He will live. What I take with one hand I give with the other."

Jim had taken the life of the factor; he had given Jim his life. And when he was tried three months later for murder, some one else said this for him, and the hearts of all, judge and jury, were so moved they knew not what to do.

Arrowhead was never sentenced, for, at the end of the first day's trial, he lay down to sleep and never waked again. He was found the next morning still and cold, and there was clasped in his hands a little doll which Nancy had given him on one of her many visits to the prison during her father's long illness. They found a piece of paper in his belt with these words in the Cree language: "With my hands on his heart at the post I gave the life that was in me, saving his, but he is dead now. Arrowhead, the chief, goes to find life again by the well at the root of the tree. How!"

On the evening of the day that Arrowhead made his journey to "the well at the root of the tree" a stranger knocked at the door of Captain Templeton's cottage; then, without awaiting admittance, entered.

Jim was sitting with Nancy on his knee, her head against his shoulder, Sally at his side, her face alight with some of her many smiles. Before the knock came to the door Jim had just said: "Why do your eyes shine so, Sally? What's in your mind?" She had been about to answer, to say to him what had been swelling her heart with pride, though she had no means to tell him what he had forgotten—not till midnight. But the figure that entered the room, a big man with deep-set eyes, a man of power who had carried everything before him in the battle of life, answered for her.

"You have won the stake, Jim," he said, in a hoarse voice. "You and she have won the stake, and I've brought it—brought it."

Before they could speak he placed in Sally's hands bonds for five million dollars.

"Jim—Jim my son!" he burst out. Then, suddenly, he sank into a chair and, putting his head in his hands, sobbed aloud.

"My God, but I'm proud of you—speak to me, Jim. You've spoken to me, Jim. He was ashamed of his tears, but he could not wipe them away.

"Father, dear old man!" said Jim, and put his hands on the broad shoulders.

Sally knelt down beside him, took both the great hands from the tear-stained face and pressed against her cheek. But presently she put Nancy on his knees.

"I don't like you to cry," the child said, softly, "but today I cried, too, 'cause my Indian man is dead."

The old man could not speak, but he put his cheek down to hers. After a minute, "Oh, but she's worth ten times that!" he said, as Sally came close to him with the bundle he had thrust into her hands.

"Your folks have disinherited you—you have almost nothing, and I will not change my mind."

ward that "gri-gri" meant "gray-gray," to signify that she called him after his grizzled hairs.

A few minutes later Jim was in the Commissioner's office. The murder of a Hudson Bay Company's man had been committed in the Cree country. The stranger whom Jim and Sally had seen riding across the plains had brought the news for thirty miles, carried from point to point. The Commissioner was uncertain what to do, as the Crees were restless through want of food and the absence of game, and a force sent to capture Arrowhead, the chief who had committed the murder, might precipitate trouble. Jim solved the problem by offering to go alone and bring the chief into the post. It was two hundred miles to the Cree encampment, and the journey had its double dangers.

Another officer was sent on the expedition for which Jim had been preparing, and he made ready to go upon his lonely duty. His wife did not know till three days after he had gone what the nature of his mission was.

Jim made his journey in good weather with his faithful dogs alone, and came into the camp of the Crees armed with only a revolver. If he had gone with ten men, there would have been an instant melee, in which he would have lost his life. This is what the chief had expected, had prepared for; but Jim was more formidable alone, with power far behind him which could come with force and destroy the tribe, if resistance was offered, than with fifty men. His tongue had a gift of terse and picturesque

there's to be a change of orders. Something's happened—a bad job up in the Cree country, I think. A few minutes later Jim was in the Commissioner's office. The murder of a Hudson Bay Company's man had been committed in the Cree country. The stranger whom Jim and Sally had seen riding across the plains had brought the news for thirty miles, carried from point to point. The Commissioner was uncertain what to do, as the Crees were restless through want of food and the absence of game, and a force sent to capture Arrowhead, the chief who had committed the murder, might precipitate trouble. Jim solved the problem by offering to go alone and bring the chief into the post. It was two hundred miles to the Cree encampment, and the journey had its double dangers.

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