

Grenfell will never forget those swift seconds, just before he slipped over the border between delirium and unconsciousness.

When the Door Opened

By JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

Author of "The Valley of Silent Men," "The Courage of Marge O'Donnell," "The River's End," Etc.

Illustration by HAROLD LUND

FLEMING, the fox-breeder, filled his sweetwood briar with fresh tobacco as a gust of the autumn wind blowing down and off Hudson's Bay screamed over the roof of the cabin. It was a wild night outside, with twisting black clouds scudding low overhead and a November wind moaning in the chaos of darkness that hung over the illimitable wilderness. A few moments before Fleming had said that it meant the beginning of winter, and that tomorrow he would start banking his fox-dens.

A clear-eyed, strong-muscled and quiet-spoken man was Fleming—in the leaping glow of the birch fire roaring in the big fireplace he was a man to look twice at. Watching him as he slowly and meditatively thumbed down the tobacco in his pipe sat Anderson, a sergeant in the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, and Carrigan, the Hudson's Bay Company's inspector—both stopping over-night on their way to Fort Churchill. It was Anderson's first visit. But Carrigan had once traveled from Albany House down to the line of rail with Fleming and a bunch of his breed-foxes, and it was he—remembering a year-old incident of that trail—who had brought up the subject of dogs. On that subject Fleming had strange ideas. Anderson had opened his eyes, surprised at first and then amused, when he heard them. Once he had laughed, but observing the flush that had gathered in the fox-breeder's face he caught himself quickly, and apologized.

"I don't mean to ridicule your idea," he had hastened to say. "There's no one in all the Upper Country who loves dogs more than I do, Fleming. Yet I can't understand—quite—why it is your hobby to gather round you here all the crippled and toothless canines in the country. There's that broken-legged, half-blind, and wind-jammed brute the Indian brought you today—and you paid money for him. He isn't worth a dollar. Wouldn't he be better off with a bullet in his brain?"

And Fleming's quiet, strong face was crossed by a slow smile as he raised a lighted match to the bowl of his pipe.

He called softly then, and in response there came a shuffling sound and the *click, click, click* of claws on the floor. Between Carrigan and Anderson and into the yellow

low flare of light The Prince came to Fleming, his master. The majesty of the old dog's name had long since fallen from him like a mantle out-worn by the years. He was very old. His muzzle was turning gray. Hair once long and silky and sleek as a fox's coat was now shaggy and brittle, and its golden lights had faded into the drab and lifeless color of a gunny-sack. But his eyes were unchanged. They were big, and brown, and steady in their gaze, and when they looked at Fleming there was something deeply and intensively questing in them—something which only they two must have understood.

At a low-spoken word from his master, The Prince dropped down at Fleming's feet.

"That dog once belonged to a man I knew," said Fleming, looking straight at Anderson. "I knew him so well that—I also know his story. And the dog was better than the man. If death had to take one of them, it was right that the man should die—and the dog live. And I say it is also true of tens of thousands of other dogs and men. If the average man possessed the loyalty, the honesty and the faith of the average dog we'd be an entirely different race. It's our egoism, of course—our eternal self-sufficiency, our blind belief in the doctrine that 'I am It'—and God intended it to be so. We're fortunate in having a tongue that talks, that's all. Now this man I knew was like ourselves—of the average sort—and if some one had told him that his dog was better than he—"

He stopped, with a suggestive shrug of his shoulders.

Carrigan nodded toward The Prince.

"That was the dog?"

"Yes."

"And the man—"

"Ordinary. We'll call him Grenfell—if you care to hear what happened to him. That was his mother's name."

Anderson unbuckled his revolver holster and dropped it to the floor. He leaned a little forward, interested.

"I'd like to hear," he said.

Over their heads they could hear again the sobbing

of the wind, and with it came the *tap, tap, tapping* of a spruce bough on the cabin roof, as though a hand up there was trying to call their attention.

"It is rather strange," said Fleming, "that what were perhaps the two most important incidents in this man's life came with a storm. It was like this—wind under a moaning sky, and rain, when he went home that night. You see he had a home, and a wife. He was just of the decent average in a big city, with a job that paid him five thousand a year, and advancement in sight. The home was the chief thing, and of course included in the home was the woman. He had taken a keen delight in watching that home grow in beauty and comfort, and he must have thought himself very much in love with the woman. But I'll skip over that quickly. It doesn't matter much here, except to show you how completely his world had anchored itself in and about that home. The important thing is that he returned that night—in a tumult of wind and storm—and that his arrival was late, and unexpected. He was supposed to be out of the city, you understand. And he had his own latchkey, and the shutters were rattling and the wind was howling when he went in, so that no one heard. He was wet, and the water dripped from him in the hallway, but he was warm with the pleasurable thrill of home-coming. He would 'surprise' some one, he thought. Well, he did. I won't go into the unpleasant detail of it, gentlemen. They didn't hear him, the woman and the man—his own employer. But the crash of his world as it went to pieces about his ears drowned the wind and the storm and all else but their voices. Perhaps for a minute or two he crouched listening at the door of the woman's room. Then he went quietly down into his den. It was his gun room. In it were his hunting trophies, his fishing tackle, and the thousand and one odds and ends an outdoors man gathers about him. His mind, you will understand, was very definite. A friend had sent him a Colt's automatic for a birthday present, one of the new army pistols, and he slipped a clipful of cartridges in it quite coolly. He was not of the weak-kneed 'jury box' sort who believes that

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every woman who goes bad is lured by a man, and should be shielded from punishment. As I say, his mind was very definite. He was going to kill them both.

"IN the upper hall there was a light, and the door of the woman's room was slightly ajar. The man paused there for barely an instant, and in that instant the strange thing happened. Something cool and soft touched the back of the clenched hand that hung at his side. He looked down. It was his dog, gentlemen. Yes, the cold, caressing muzzle of his dog against the back of his hand. And the dog's eyes were looking straight up into his—big, deep, talking eyes that had in them a look of *understanding*. Laugh if you will, gentlemen—it is your privilege!—but that dog *knew*. He knew what was happening, and he must have known what was in the man's mind, for he kept looking and looking until the man's knotted fingers grew limp and something cool swept over the fire in his brain. Gentlemen, that dog's eyes brought the man back into reason. He went into the room, and the dog went with him; and when they came out again the woman and the other man were left alive, and together the dog and master walked out into the storm and left that 'home' forever. And the strangest thing of all is this: The man had never made much of a pal of the dog. It had been more the woman's dog than the man's. Anderson, do you think this man did right?"

Anderson drew in a deep breath, and straightened himself.

"As a man of the Law, I would say that he did."

"To perdition with your law," exploded Carrigan, clenching his fists. "The man was a fool. He should have killed them both, even if he hung for it afterward. The law is a poor apology for justice—sometimes."

Fleming was smiling.

"Perhaps I asked the question a bit too early," he said. "But I agree with Carrigan—the man was a fool. Not that he was saved from committing murder, but because of what happened afterward. Anyway, he doesn't matter much. I am telling *his* story only that you may know the story of the dog. He followed his master. Instinct, if you're too full of ego to call it reason, made him understand the situation. He knew that something was wrong, and the love of fairness and justice that's a part of every dog made him follow at his master's heels out into the storm. He might have remained with the woman—in warmth and comfort. But he didn't. He went out into a beating rain and a roaring wind that nearly swept the man off his feet. And the man scarcely noticed him. But it made no difference. The dog followed. The man found shelter for the night with a bachelor friend. The dog waited outside all through that night of rain and wind. When morning came he was waiting on the step for his master. No, he didn't go home. I tell you he knew that Grenfell, his master, needed him. He sensed it in some mysterious and indefinable way, just as a dog will sense the approach of death when

Contemtable—unless the crashing down of his world did something inside his head, which I'm charitable enough to believe. And the dog went with him. They began to wander—and after that were always wandering. The first months were most horrible to Grenfell; the sickness in his head, if it was that sickness, was worse then. It was during those months that the dog put up his biggest fight. I'm coming to the thing at last, gentlemen. It will startle you. Possibly you will not believe. But it is true. Within a year after he went home that night in the storm Grenfell was a *tramp!*"

Fleming paused in a sudden lull of the wind over the cabin roof. He looked down, and the old dog's eyes were on his face.

"A tramp," he repeated, smiling faintly. "Not a hobo or a wandering vagrant, you understand—but a *tramp*. A drifter, a nomad of the country roads and villages—for he shunned the cities. He worked just enough—usually for the farmers—to keep clothes on his back and food in his stomach. His pride, you see, was gone. In another year he would have been *down*. Do you understand what I mean? He *would* have been a vagrant then. But the dog was putting up a splendid fight for his master. Grenfell could destroy himself, but he couldn't make a hobo of the dog. There were blood and breed and a soul that wouldn't warp in that collie. He went hungry. He was sick and footsore. He fought strange dogs and was covered with wounds, but not for a moment did a yellow streak show in him. He might have found a thousand comfortable homes, for there were many who wanted him, and many who tried to lure him from his master. Twice he was stolen, and both times he escaped and overtook his drifting master on the hot and dusty roads. A fool, you say? No, he wasn't that. He was *true*. He was following Grenfell as a dog will follow and watch a little child placed in its keeping. To starve, to fight, to suffer in that duty was his triumph. And Grenfell, in what was left of his human soul, saw the naked truth at last.

He knew he was gone—and he loved the dog. So he watched his chance, and one day he gave him to a wealthy farmer who had several children and a beautiful home, and told him to keep the dog tied up for a week. When Grenfell got away he flung himself down in the shade of a tree and cried like a baby. He believed he had done what was right. It was three nights later, I think—in the early autumn—and Grenfell was sleeping in the open. Two or three times he woke to listen to the sighing of the wind in a clump of pines, and that wail of coming winter, and the loneliness of it all, put the thought of death in his heart. You see, I'm not trying to cover his weakness and his shame. I don't know what might have happened a little later. But the dog was following Grenfell's trail that night. When he opened his eyes in the morning, it was because the collie was there—caressing his face with his tongue. You draw a deep breath, Carrigan? Is it because you disbelieve? No? I'm glad of that. I am satisfied if you call it simply brute devotion. The bigger thing I won't

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"That was the beginning—really—of the dog's story. I don't suppose either of you know what it means to go flitterly and entirely to pieces—like a broken cup. That's what Grenfell did, and right there is where he fell below the level of his dog. Grenfell, after that moment of strength before his wife's door, proved himself a pitiable weakling. And yet I hold it was not so much his strength as the dog's soul that prevented murder. Anyway, Grenfell slowly but surely disintegrated. You've got to call it that. He ran away from his job, from the divorce that followed, and from his friends. Contemptible. I say,

year he would have been down. Do you understand what I mean? He would have been a vagrant then. But the dog was putting up a splendid fight for his master. Grenfell could destroy himself, but he couldn't make a hobo of the dog. There were blood and breed and a soul that wouldn't warp in that collie. He went hungry. He was sick and footsore. He fought strange dogs and was covered with wounds, but not for a moment did a yellow streak show in him. He might have found a thousand comfortable homes, for there were many who wanted him, and many who tried to lure him from his master. Twice he was stolen, and both times he escaped and overtook his drifting master on the hot and dusty roads. A fool, you say? No, he wasn't that. He was true. He was following Grenfell as a dog will follow and watch a little child placed in its keeping. To starve, to fight, to suffer in that duty was his triumph. And Grenfell, in what was left of his human soul, saw the naked truth at last.

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"And in that hour I believe the dog saw the change, too, for he flattened himself out and barked as he hadn't barked since they left the old home. Of course, it may have been because of Grenfell's changed point of view. It may be that his head cleared all at once of that 'sickness' that was in it. I say it *may be*. Personally, I



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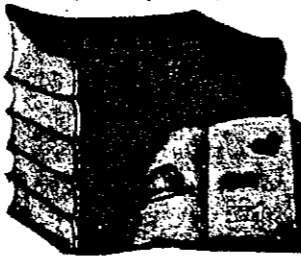
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