

Lawrence Spingarn

A HARD BIRTH

"There's a call for you, doctor. Emergency."

Tom Norton blushed as the elevator boy spoke. He had not decided until late last night to sleep at the Lodge. Tired as he was, he had danced all evening with Joyce MacCallum. Although his room was far from hers, he could not hide from professional calls too, even if Joyce wished him to share her morning on the lake. His frown deepened as he left the elevator, reached the Lodge desk, and read the message the clerk gave him. The clerk leaned forward.

"Anything wrong, sir?"

Tom did not answer. He might as well forget his plans for today. This maternity case had worried him. It would take him miles from the Lodge, which had become the nearest substitute for a long overdue vacation. He felt tired, very tired. Was Joyce at breakfast, as she had promised? He quit the desk, crossed the spacious lobby, and found the dining room. His search narrowed at once to a golden helmet of hair and magnetic shell-blue eyes. The nearby tables were unoccupied, and Tom did not need to pretend they were strangers.

"You're late, Tom. A fine fisherman, indeed!"

Her smile widened as Tom sat down opposite her. If he placed work first, her childish pout would reappear. He was not seeking to distress her. He glanced at her diamond wrist-watch, at the fine camel coat tossed over the empty chair. His voice broke when he mentioned the summons.

"Oh, Tom! You mean, no fishing?"

Her smile vanished. Her eyes were brilliant, but her mouth quivered. Yes, Joyce was used to freedom, or its equivalent in money. The Lodge, she had often remarked, was the best resort hotel in Canada for her type of shop. Where else, she liked to boast, would people pay these prices for Scottish woollens, leather goods, or sport clothes? And her rooms upstairs, which were beyond his means, had rather

stunned Dr. Norton. When he nodded, Joyce held her tongue until the waitress went off with his order.

"How do you stand the pace, Tom? You work a sixty hour week, it seems. Lest we forget, this will be our third broken date. . . ."

She sat back, bit her lip, glanced at the occupied tables. Tom followed her shrewd glance to a middle-aged couple.

"You could make a fortune here, in summers alone. As a matter of fact, the job of house doctor is open. It's a cinch, Tom."

"Not for me," he said. "A pill-doctor, yes—but not me."

Her pout worsened while the waitress served Tom. The waitress was slow; Joyce tapped on the table, impatient and annoyed. Tom brightened with inspiration the moment they were alone.

"Joyce. Come along as helper, and we can fish later. Sure! Be my nurse for a few hours, at least."

Her lips swallowed his proposal, yet when he touched her, she shuddered and withdrew.

"Sorry, dear. Indians never wash, and smells bother me. No thanks!"

At twenty-nine, Tom realized, Joyce looked and behaved years younger. Her skin was fresh, soft, and well cared for. The lake outside matched her eyes. He sniffed the perfume from her scarf, hoped that she would smile again.

"Don't be stubborn," he coaxed. "It's only a girl having a baby."

"An Indian girl. That's *your* speed, Tom!"

Her eyes moistened, but Tom was surprised when she flung down her tortured napkin, rose, and fled into the lobby. The guests at breakfast stared at Tom. He pretended to eat his eggs, noticed the camel hair coat again, stopped chewing. He paid the waitress, draped the coat on his arm, and strolled from the dining room.

Joyce leaned against the wall of the terrace above the lake. She stiffened as he neared, turned a sullen face toward the water, resembled a handsome martyr. Tom quashed his laugh and measured her raised leg. He could handle her moods. The ice would melt soon.

"You left this behind, Joyce."

Tom suffered more in the silence. Breeze veiled her face with hair, mounded the autumn leaves about her russet shoes. The rich blue sweater emphasized her pallor; the cropped flannel skirt and high cable-pattern socks bared white, slim knees. Wilfulness, Tom imagined, fitted Joyce better than this coat.

"You'll catch cold," he teased her.

She shivered, gripped her brass-studded belt, but held still as he draped the garment over her shoulders. Their mouths were close. When she refused her lips, Tom kissed her fingers. Her lips relented, budded open.

"Remember, Tom, this is my day off. A quarrel would spoil it. Go if you must, but let me stay here and fish."

"Yes, ma'm'selle. Five o'clock?"

"Sharp!" she murmured between kisses. "For cocktails and dinner in my quarters. It's a date."

Tom released her and went in blind haste down the granite steps to the lake. He blew her a kiss from the dock. When she did not respond, he felt even more like a deserter. Should he phone old Dr. Harley in Prince William, and give him the case? He longed to see Joyce signal and descend the steps in a flutter of delight, skirt and hair whipped by the wind. . . . But alas, this was his case. The pregnant girl was in danger. Tom squinted at the lake, where white-caps pushed against his launch. His equipment was in order. The motor started without a fuss. When he peered back, however, the terrace was deserted.

Was Joyce right to be so vexed? Six years in a district bigger than one of the eastern provinces had got him nowhere. Isolated by lakes and forest, he had missed promotions, laboured overtime, lived on a pittance. Toronto doctors earned triple his government pay with half the effort. Joyce was from Toronto. Once he made success his goal, she would marry him with no reservations. They could take their honeymoon on the road that led from this wilderness. The red Jaguar she owned would be the vehicle for escape. And, as Tom considered the future, the wind drowned out other voices. . . .

Tom cut the motor and drifted to land. Clouds obscured the sun above Wigwam Bay. Here, a season past, cholera had emptied most of the unpainted Indian shacks. The dead quiet was a poor welcome. Even the trees scattered through the clearing were dry and withered. Burlap curtains were shrouds that flapped at broken windows. Tom re-read the message, consulted the clouds, sought in vain the inhabited shack. As he trudged up from the dock, his shouts were answered by the clatter of a loose board. A cry from the womb guided him to the doorway whose odour of tallow suggested that this might be the place.

"Mary Chuck?" he said, still unsure.

The Indian girl faced him with tranced eyes. The crucifix above the bed shadowed her faith in doctors. She was, Tom knew, just eighteen. The tartan ribbons braided in her hair were twists of vanity that counteracted her borrowed,

mannish workshirt. The iron bed lacked feet and squatted on the floor, its head rail wired like a souvenir to the wall. Mary was alone in her crisis.

"Where's Mike, Mary?"

Mary blinked sloe eyes, pointed to the lake, made a hook of her finger. So, Mike Chuck was out fishing. . . . Would he return soon, Tom wondered as he opened the kit and began the examination. Mary threw off the covers. Her thighs were not yet veined from child-bearing. Her breasts were taut with milk. At the sudden lash of pain, Tom patted her arm.

"Hang on, Mary. Hang on."

The evidence was bad. Many Indians died in labour, and Mary was built quite narrow. Infection was the second threat, because of faulty sanitation. Tom heated the stove, set a pan of water on it, and recalled what Joyce had said about smells. Had Joyce even met an Indian? By now, she was on the lake in a boat rowed by a Lodge attendant. Her long, trim legs would be stretched out. Her plump cheeks were untroubled and smooth.

"You'll do fine, Mary," Tom promised. "But Mike should be here."

"Mike?" Her berry-brown eyes quickened. "Mike see this before. Other wives die here. Fish more 'portant."

Wooden crosses in the weeds of the clearing confirmed her short story. Here, the jammed windows and the stove oppressed the air. The premature water boiled off twice. Birth was many hours away, but, when Mary winced and cried, Tom stuck the needle into her. While the injection sent her to sleep at once, he feared the new drug. No, he could not leave until Mary awoke, even if Joyce must wait. . . . Wind pounded the walls. The lake was a huge, disastrous kettle. Tom dared not think as he undressed the Indian girl.

Joyce could not have removed this soiled shirt, or even pulled the filthy blanket over that slender body. Lunch at the Lodge was always ceremonious. Because of the storm, the diningroom would be ablaze with hearthfire and light. As the orchestra played, the guests heaped their plates with rich food from the elegant buffet. And Joyce would seize the occasion to dance, with whoever asked her . . . Tom, no longer busy, closed his eyes. When he opened them, he noticed the doll in the chair.

Its head dangled, its arms drooped. Sawdust trickled from its torn side, but the blonde hair, snipped from a real woman and glued to the composition skull, was clean and lustrous. Tom rescued the doll, fondled it awhile, threw it down in disappointment. Joyce had disappointed him. Joyce belonged to the far side of the

lake. If he wanted her companionship, he should leave now. A tree scraped the shack. Wind urged him to go, but he gazed once more at Mary.

From this angle, she appeared as limp as the doll. Although her skin was dark beeswax, five brutal years would shrivel her into a squaw, or lard her with fat. Why had she tossed the doll at the chair? Had pain matured her overnight? Tom was absorbed by these questions when the porch creaked and a wizened Indian man entered the shack. Mike Chuck was home.

His smile was slow, yet he knew Dr. Norton from previous visits. He lifted both arms, shrugged, went toward his wife. His hair was black and his posture erect. Nevertheless, his face revealed its true age; empty hands accounted for his sadness.

"No fish today. Lodge people on lake. Lodge people eat meat, waste fish. 'Sport,' they say. What *you* say, doctor?"

When Mary stirred and opened her eyes, the doctor tested his syringe. While the dose had been much too weak, another shot of nepenthenes would oblige him to stay beyond dusk. A shutter banged. Pine cones scuttled across the roof. Tom decided at last on a blood smear, but the Indian grabbed his arm, and the slide crashed to the floor.

"What you do, doctor?"

Tom reassured Mike, but not himself. Armed with a smear, he would have his excuse to leave. Wind would push his launch faster. He could borrow a car from the druggist in town, and be with Joyce on schedule. Joyce, he guessed, was as her dressing table, brushing out her silken hair. . . . Mary screamed and clutched the mattress. Tom cursed his trade, refilled the syringe. The Indian stopped him again.

"All right," Tom declared. "It hurts more without the needle, Mike."

Mike understood at last. As the spasms began, he loosed the doctor and gave Mary the doll to hold. They watched her anguish until Mike bowed his head in consent. And Tom made certain of this dose.

"Okay, Mike. Sleep will help. If she wakes, call the neighbours."

"Huh!" Mike said. "No neighbours here now."

Tom counted the red ants on the floor. He could stamp on some, but the horde would persist in their march. He was caught in another stream of motion. He felt tense, divided, restless. The Indian, he supposed, wanted a final shred of comfort. Mary was his fourth wife.

"See here, Mike. This medicine kills the pain, savvy? Three drops in a glass of water. . . ."

Mike listened to instructions, but his eyes were bleak. He did not move from the bed as Tom quit the shack. The lake simmered and foamed. Thunderheads moved in slow, ominous masses. The air crackled with fuses, but the wind, no longer fickle, drove the launch straight toward the Lodge. The motor could not buck this force. It was futile to steer for the town, against the wind. Besides, the smears would keep in any ice-box until the storm abated and the chemist could evaluate them. It was just five o'clock when Tom docked beneath the Lodge terrace.

His hands and clothes were dirtied. Rain pursued him up the granite steps and into the lobby with its log fires and mingled scents. He was dishevelled and unshaved, yet the guests did not seem to notice his intrusion. He could avoid the desk and possible messages, but the elevator boy grinned and saluted him.

"Sorry, sir. Miss MacCallum went to the bar. . . ."

The bar! Surely Joyce had specified her room, but Tom allowed for his error. As he pushed into the crowded tavern, he focussed on the middle stool where Joyce was perched. Like her two male companions, she had not changed for dinner. The ceiling light glared on their red caps and wicker creels, on her blonde head and the thistle pin that secured her brief skirt. She displayed her knees as she crossed her legs, laughed, blew a smoke-ring. The joke tickled her. A dozen trout in the ice-filled tray proclaimed her luck. Tom wheeled around at the voice of the headwaiter.

"The tables are all taken, Dr. Norton. Care to sit at the bar?"

A wall of cigarette smoke kept Tom from anger, sorrow or drink. Across the furious lake, Mary Chuck would still be asleep. If he hurried, he could reach her before she awoke. Hers would be a hard birth, with much pain. She needed him.

"No," he told the headwaiter. "No, thanks."