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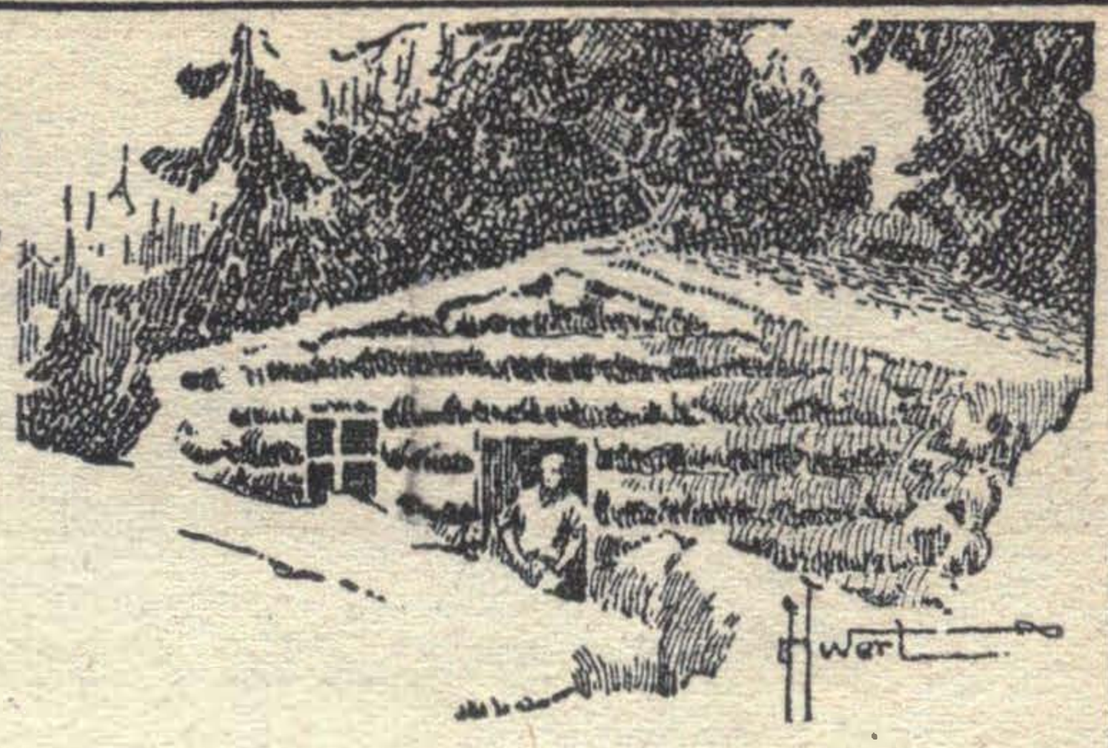

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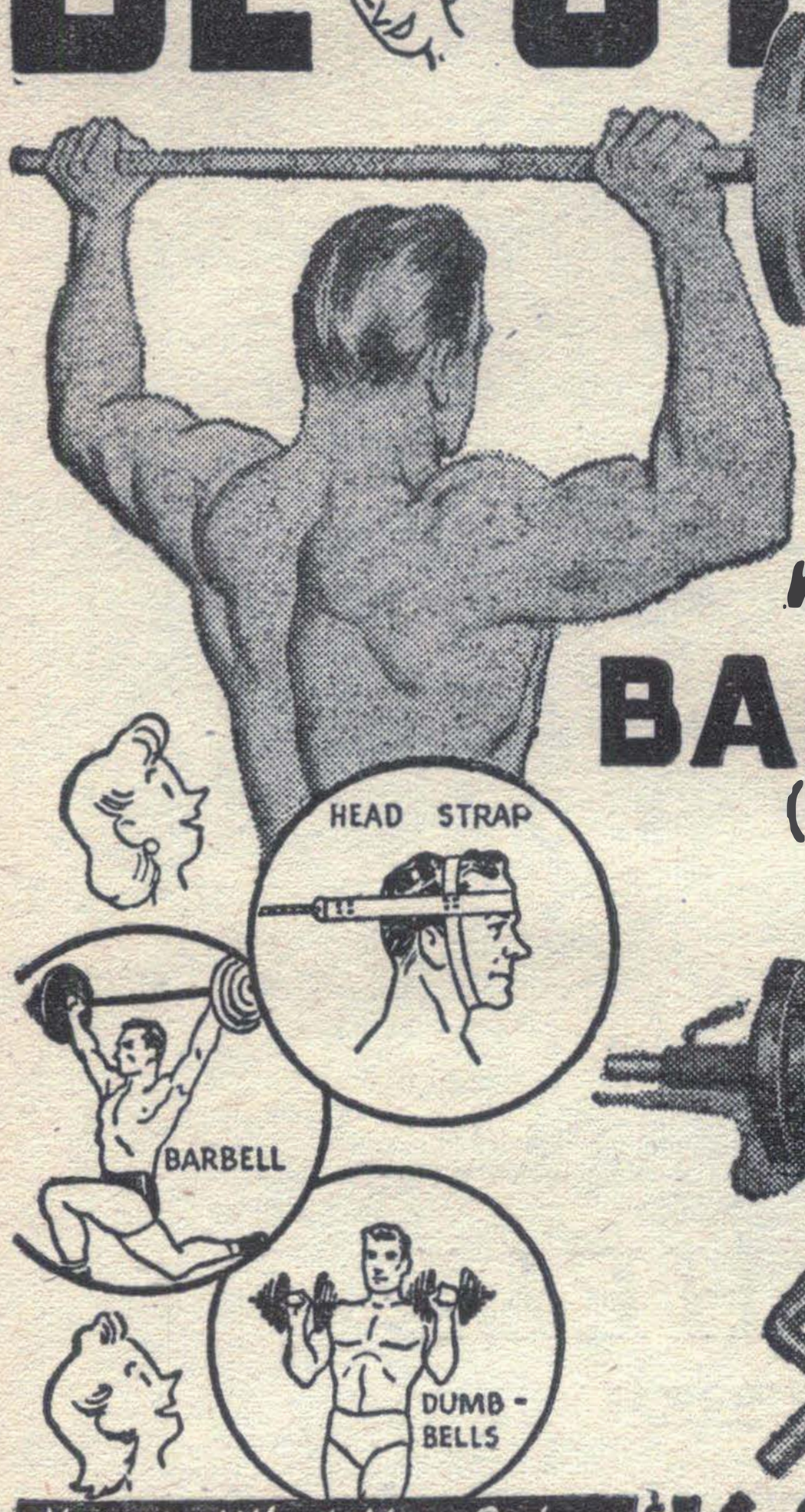

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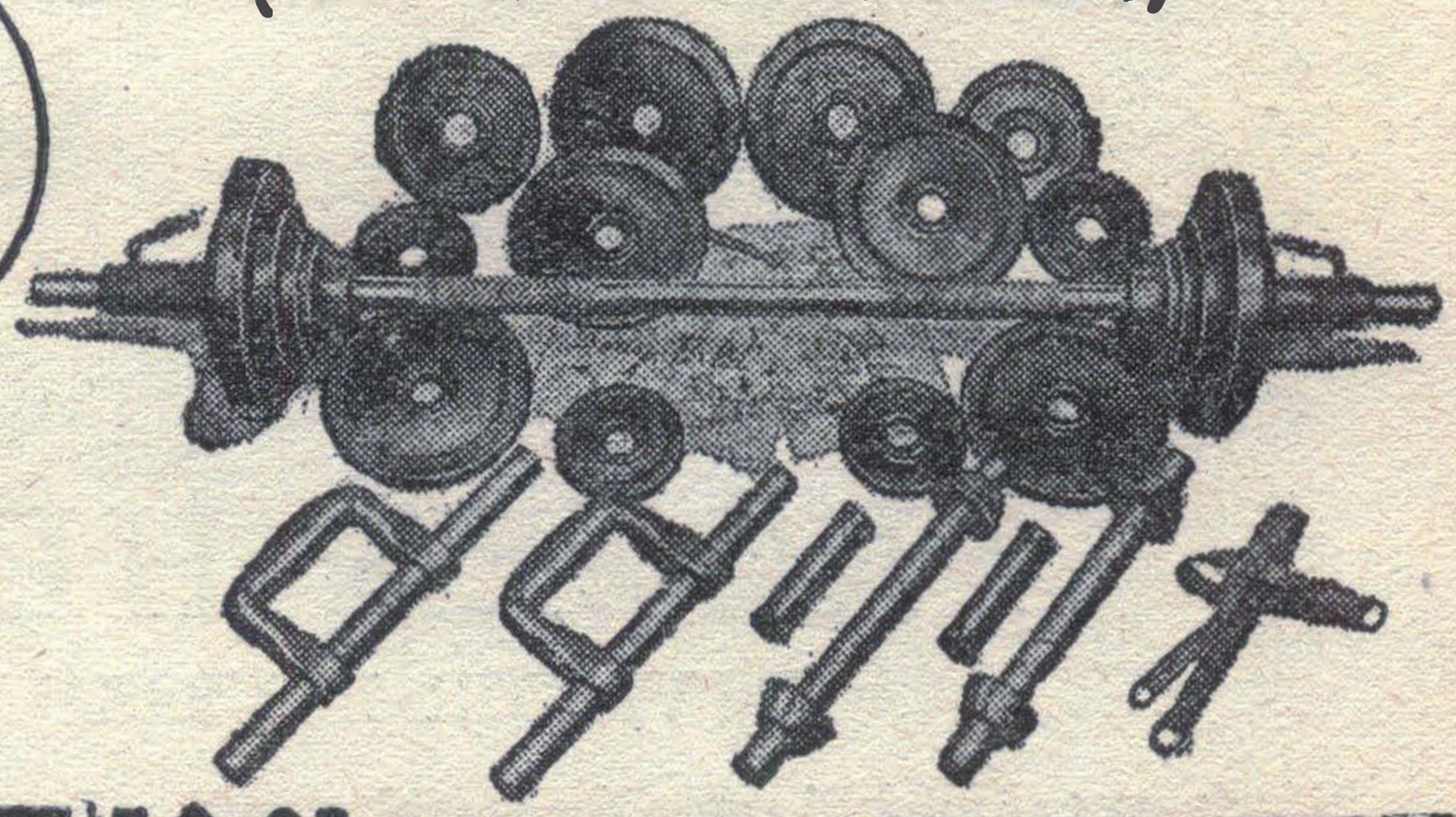

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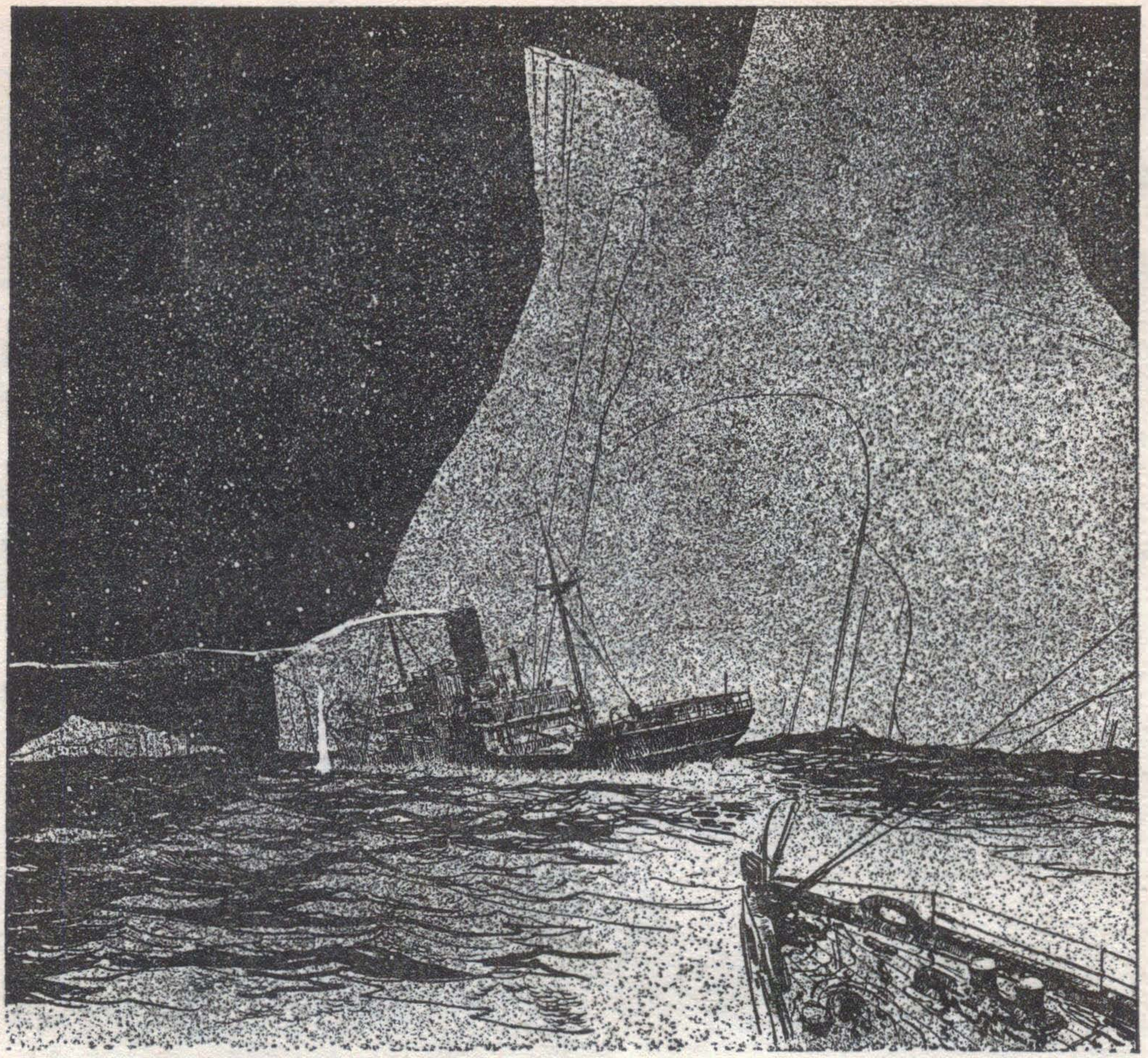


FROZEN HELL

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

"Don't go to Uniak!" came the fervid warning. But neither Jap guile nor Russian might, nor the strange horrid menace of the great Snow-Apes could keep out the man who had a job to do—Federal Inspector Hammond.

"HOW'D you like to go to Alaska again, Hammond?" Commissioner Keyes of the Bureau of Education was speaking. Hammond, an old-timer in the service, had been holding down a desk job at the Capital for longer than he cared to think about.

"Pretty well, Commissioner," Hammond answered.

Keyes looked at him with a quizzical expression in his eyes. He was not unaware of the significance of Hammond's answer. He knew how hard Hammond had always taken desk duty.

"Good. Sit down, Will. You know the Uniak peninsula? Were you ever in it?"

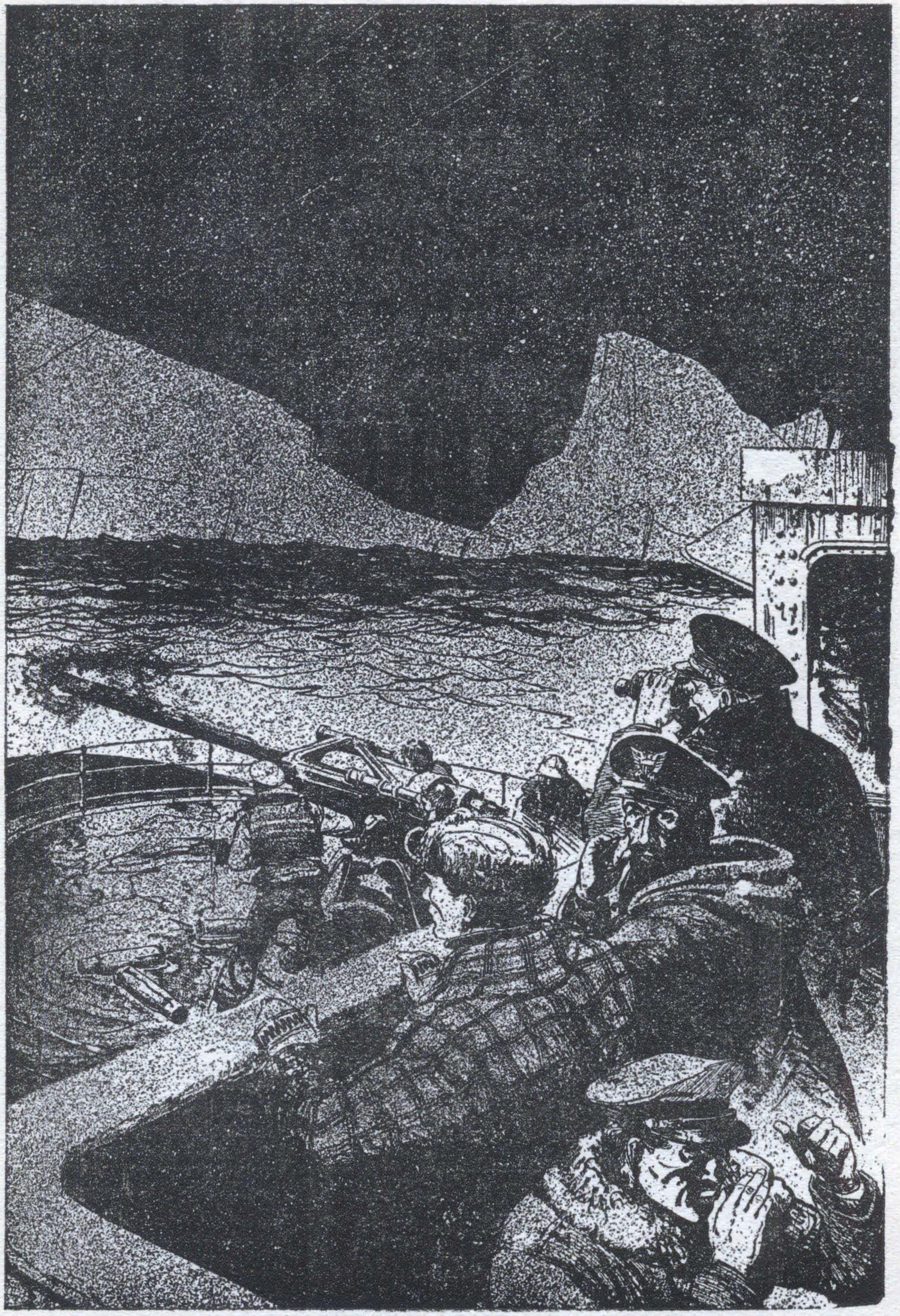
"Never north of the old mission at St. Isidore. Never knew anyone who was. All the experts are agreed there's no gold there."

"Just what is there in the Uniak region, according to your knowledge, Hammond?"

"Caribou. Absolutely nothing else. The Uniak district is the biggest caribou field in Alaska. It's the summer stamping ground for the western branch of the herds after they move north from the forest line in spring.

"I guess this is something bigger than caribou, Will," said Keyes. "You know

The roar and recoil of the deck gun made the cutter vibrate from bow to stern . . . and the shell crossed the bow of the fugitive.



the Alaska & Far North Trading Co., that Seattle concern, have acquqired certain development rights in the St. Isidore region? Their territory's a vague one, as it's all unsurveyed land up there; that means they can go practically anywhere they want. They seem to have broken into the Uniak district, away north of their actual territory. They've got an agent up there called Tallboys, and we want to find out just what he's doing.

"There's an Eskimo settlement at Uniak now, you know, eighty miles north of St. Isidore under the charge of a woman missionary, Miss Florence Kenton, who was moved up there after the mission at St. Isidore closed. She's affiliated with the Bureau of Education, and is a local school and reindeer superintendent. She may be able to put you on the track of whatever's going on."

"Isn't it up to the revenue people?"

"It is, but, as you know, we're co-operating with them pretty closely. There's reason to believe that the company has established a secret base in the Uniak district. You know, Will, that coast's never been charted, and won't be for another fifty years. It's fog-bound six days out of seven the year around, and a maze of rocks and islands."

"How did this belief arise?"

"In the first place," answered the Commissioner, "the revenue cutter officers have seen lights burning ashore at night, way in among the islands. Eskimo lamps aren't visible miles out at sea. Those lights are electric, and, as it's impossible to get supplies up over the Uniaks, that means the company has discovered a channel inshore, and that there's either a ship lying there, or else a ship has brought up dynamos.

"Then the *Shrimp* reports having chased a suspicious craft into the fog several times, only to lose her. And, lastly, somebody's wirelessing up there."

"In code?"

"Confound it, no! We could decipher a code. The *Shrimp's* picked up the spoken word. And it isn't any known language on earth.

"Now, Will, inasmuch as nothing more can de done from the sea end, we've got to tackle those fellows by land. And I want you to go up and look the ground over. Make your base at St. Isidore, and start north into the Uniak district. Try to find if there's a land approach to this suspected base. Try to find out if a filibuster's being planned against the rookeries. Find out all you can, anyway. You're bound to pick up something from the Eskimos and Miss Kenton. And you'll go nominally as traveling district superintendent of the school and reindeer service."

Commissioner Keyes drew his chair closer.

"You know, Will, the company has some mighty big men connected with it. Influential men, politicians, men who can make things warm for us if we cross them by blocking appropriations, and so on. You needn't go out of the way to advertise your job."

"You want me to go up incog?"

"That will depend on what conditions you find up there. But don't go around slapping your chest. Hammond, if this should turn out to be preparations for a large-scale sealing raid, the Japs are sure to have a hand in it. That makes it delicate. That's why I'm sending you. You'll board the *Shrimp* at Seattle, and she'll take you up to St. Isidore, or some nearby point, and drop you there. After that it's up to you. And I think you'd better start first thing tomorrow, before the news of your commission leaks out. The fact is, if the news does get around, the order will probably have to be canceled. In such event, go up just the same, on leave. Write me out an application for four months' leave, to cover that contingency."

Will obeyed, and then went out into the spring sunshine

II

SOME days later the *Shrimp* was steaming slowly through swamping seas and an intermittent fog off the Uniak peninsula. Will stood beside Captain Hughes on the bridge, peering out.

The intense cold was of that clammy stickiness that bites to the bone. Their pea jackets were covered with frozen spray.

During the brief voyage Will had learned all that Hughes knew about the operations of the Company. Hughes had met Tallboys at St. Isidore.

"Slick as bear's grease," he told Will. "He's running things with a high hand in

the Uniak district. Got the Eskimos scared cold. There's some yarn that he's brought over a lot of immense hairy apes from Siberia, and the natives are in terror of them. And he's collected a nice little assortment of the various human sub-species up there, too. I recommend you to watch out particularly for Mr. Ohashi, a Jap brother, and Schmidt, a Russian."

Will thought over this and other conversations as he stood on the bridge with Hughes. According to their plans, the *Shrimp* was to put him ashore at Iquit, an Eskimo settlement some twenty-five miles south of St. Isidore, where the warm current left the shore comparatively ice-free.

"Tallboys' gang's overrunning St. Isidore," said Hughes, "and to put you ashore there off a revenue boat would be to advertise your job to the world. If you get dogs at Iquit and start north in the guise of a prospector, you'll probably get away with it. There was a small strike near St. Isidore last fall, and a few prospectors are sure to be drifting up this spring."

Hughes sat down at the radio and began tuning in, as he had done throughout the day at intervals.

"We're off the Uniaks now," he said. "And hereabouts is where we sometimes get somebody on the short waves."

For about ten minutes nothing was heard. Then suddenly there began a buzzing. And there followed an extraordinary medley sound—voices, the steady crackle of something which resolved itself into the ticking of a number of clocks or watches, the splashing of waves. One could almost reconstruct the scene, if the ear had taken over the work of the eye.

"Is that the base speaking?"

"Base and ship talking, I figure out. Better than code, that lingo."

"What's it supposed to be?"

"We've come to the conclusion that it's a dialect of Japanese—at least, we'd thought so. That's a language pretty difficult for a Westerner to learn, you know. It's got Chinese skinned a thousand times. Code can be deciphered, but this—" He shrugged his shoulders. "Well Hammond, it's not Japanese after all, unless it's a variety that bears practically no resemblance to the original tongue. Last trip we attached a dictaphone and got that lingo on record. We sent it to the Smithsonian. Nobody could translate a word of it."

A hail from the lookout brought them to their feet. Through a rift in the fog into which a pale flood of slanting, watery sunlight poured, a ship was visible wallowing in the troughs of the waves, perhaps a mile away.

Instantly all was ordered movement on board the *Shrimp*. Hughes directed through his megaphone. While the signal flags went fluttering up, the tarpaulin was stripped from the four-pounder in the bow.

The fog was lifting all about them. It went up like a great drop-curtain, disclosing the black, choppy sea, rippled with sunlight. And now in the farthest distance, the merest trace of white against the sky, rose the peaks of the Uniaks.

The string of flags was at the masthead. Will stood beside Hughes as, glasses to his eyes, he watched the strange vessel. But no answering signal came, and presently it was clear that she had turned in an arc of thirty-five degrees and was heading toward the range.

The cutter trembled under the increasing pressure in her boilers, but the stranger was holding her own. The gun crew waited at their posts. Hughes shouted the command, and the roar and recoil of the four-pounder made the cutter vibrate from bow to stern.

The shell crossed the bows of the fugitive and plunged into the sea, flinging up a column of spray. A half minute passed. The fugitive had zigzagged again. She was within easy range of destruction. But the fog was once more dimming the surface of the sea. The line of white on the horizon disappeared.

"Let her have it!" roared Hughes through the megaphone.

Simultaneous with the discharge of the *Shrimp's* second shot a gun mounted on the stern of the fugitive opened fire. The shell whined overhead and dropped a hundred feet to port. A second and a third followed, nearer. But now the *Shrimp* was firing steadily, and a roar of cheers went up as one of her shells landed fairly amidships of the stranger. Through his binoculars Will saw a patch of black destruction spread into a line of fire.

Then suddenly the fog came rolling in. In fifteen, twenty seconds the fugitive had vanished utterly. Still the *Shrimp* fired with angry, ineffectual venom into the dense white shroud that enveloped her; then Hughes called new orders down the engine-tube and turned to Will with a bitter gesture.

"Ten minutes more and we'd have had her," he said. "It's an old story, only we never got so close before. Now—half an hour farther on that course would have piled us up on the rocks."

Cursing angrily, Hughes paced the bridge, peering out into the fog, which came rolling in in gusty billows.

"Well, we'll land you at Iquit in the morning, according to schedule. And I wish you joy of your end of the job, Hammond," he said.

Will went to his cabin, but about an hour later Hughes summoned him on deck. It had cleared again. The sea lay vast and black under the brilliant stars. Hughes pointed landward.

No land was visible, but after looking for a few moments Will saw a little steady blur of light low down on the horizon. Through the glasses this resolved itself into a haze of lights, like a constellation of Pleiades.

"There's your 'natural gas,' Hammond," said the officer. "Somewhere in there, between the Uniaks and the sea, you'll find the answer."

III

IQUIT, the Eskimo village twenty-five miles south of St. Isidore, proved to be non-existent. One of those causeless migrations of the Eskimos which are liable to occur at almost any season had left no trace of it beyond the piles of refuse on the beach. As there were, therefore, no dogs to be had, the motorboat which had landed Will through the loose floe ice took back to the ship the supplies that it had brought.

"You'll pick up everything you need at St. Isidore," said Hughes. "You've got a pretty heavy load"—he was looking at the radio case—"but I guess you can make St. Isidore by night along the beach trail, and it would be madness to land you there from the *Shrimp*.

"Tallboys and his gang aren't likely to stop at much if they guess who you are. Good luck to you."

Will had arranged with Hughes for co-operation by radio. Now he humped his pack and started. Over his drill parka he wore an old, serviceable coonskin coat. He had a coonskin cap and gauntlets. Round his neck were slung his binoculars. In his belt was an automatic, with a number of rounds of ammunition, and he had also a carbine in a waterproof case of moose-skin, not caribou, which, unlike other hides, shrinks when wet instead of stretching—and fifty rounds of ammunition, a flashlight torch, a small French alcohol stove and some solidified alcohol. He wore boots, but had moccasins in his pack and snowshoes strapped outside. However, there was no need of them on the low, tide-washed beach, which afforded fairly easy going.

In spite of his load, which convinced Will that he was no longer in the physical condition he had been in before the days of desk routine, he made fair going. Toward nightfall two things told him that he was approaching St. Isidore—the incessant howling of dogs and an increasing, penetrating stench, that indescribable stench of a native Eskimo village, blended of de-composing terrene and marine offal which yet brought back vividly the memories of the old days. Then a turn of the trail, and St. Isidore lay before him.

ON the outskirts, in the scattered native village of skin tents, half a dozen dog teams were camped, sufficiently far apart to reduce the likelihood of a canine Armageddon to an uninterrupted series of yowling challenges to combat. The village itself was mainly a large square marked off for construction work, and at present dotted with temporary shacks, but it contained too a large company trading store, a number of smaller stores, a hotel, and a double row of frame shanties. The old mission building was a wind-swept ruin.

Half a dozen men were lounging dismally in the hotel bar when Will entered, after depositing his pack in the so-called room provided by the surly landlord. Will fancied that his appearance was the occasion for a sort of malicious satisfaction

among the prospectors.

"Where d' you blow from, old-timer?" inquired an elderly, grey-bearded prospector, who, tilted back in his chair, was surveying the scene with an expression of funereal melancholy.

"Been wintering south of here," answered Will. "I heard how there'd been a big strike in this district last fall."

A chorus of morose jeers and laughter greeted this.

"Welcome to the Stung and Come Agin Club, stranger! Ain't you heard how the Company's grabbed all the gold in this part of the country?"

"What's that you say?" demanded Will.

Affecting to be greatly disconcerted by this information, Will elicited the story from half a dozen informants. It appeared that the Company claimed a half share in all placer gold mined in the district, with the result that a number of prospectors who had already arrived were now preparing to depart. In fact the St. Isidore district had been effectually closed to the world by this group of the Company's.

Suddenly the conversation was broken off as two men entered the barroom. The crowd eyed them with furtive hostility and manifest uneasiness.

One was about six feet in height, with a stubble of beard on his chin. He had a pug nose, little pig eyes, and an enormous round face. The legs were short and bowed, but the body was huge, so that, had the legs been of commensurate length, he would have stood six inches taller than he did. The shoulders were great ridges of rolling muscle and fat.

His companion was a slim little Jap, with a keen, oval face, and features of that aristocratic cast that one associates with a Japanese print.

Surveying the room insolently, the two advanced to the bar and ordered drinks. Will thought he knew this pair. He guessed the time was opportune to show his hand. He went up to the bar.

"Want to pick up a team of good dogs." he told the landlord. "Know where I can get them?"

The landlord cast a surly glance at him. The two men turned and surveyed him too.

"Best ask Mr. Schmidt," grinned the landlord, indicating the big man, who looked Will up and down.

"What you want dogs for?" he growled.

"Going prospecting," answered Will, in a tense silence. "Heard there was a gold strike."

"Yah? Which way you think of going?"

"By Uniak way."

A bestial grin expanded over the Russian's face.

"There ain't no gold Uniak way," he said. "You took the wrong route, old-timer. That's your way!"

Laying an enoromus hand on Will's shoulder, he spun him around and pointed southward.

"Take your hand off my shoulder," said Will quietly.

The giant's grasp tightened. The little bloodshot eyes glared into Will's malignantly. Will brought his right hand across his body and shot it upward, connecting in a jarring contact with the Russian's chin.

The giant released him and went staggering back. Next moment he had pulled a formidable sheath knife from his belt and was coming back, growling like a beast. His eyes rolled in his head.

But with remarkable celerity the little Jap seized the other's wrist and began chattering excitedly.

The Russian resisted savagely. But as the big man, bellowing fury, tried to shake off the other's grasp, the Jap's wrists, all vibrant sinew, executed some movement that Will's eyes could hardly follow.

Next moment the Russian was leaning back against the bar screeching with pain, his arms crossed in front of his body, wrists locked as in a vise. The knife clattered to the floor. And all the while the little Jap was chattering.

He turned his face toward Will, without releasing his lock of the Russian's wrists. "You will please go away now, no?" he lisped. "And, my friend, do not try to go up to the Uniak. It is verree, verree bad medicine up there. There is no gold and no dogs, and the dangers of the trail are verree great. The Company is not anxious for strangers to go there among those dangers unless they are in a position to protect them, and that they cannot do. So Mr. Schmidt was trying to tell you when you misunderstood him. You will pardon Mr. Schmidt. He is verree hot-

tempered."

A formidable smile crossed his face, which looked as if it were cast in bronze, flickered and went out. The Jap turned impassively to the big Russian and began chattering again. It was evident which was the master mind. The Russian made some sullen answer and, released, stooped, picked up his knife, sheathed it, glaring after Will, who, having ascertained all that he wanted to know had turned away. He had no doubt which of the pair was the more dangerous enemy.

HE made his way out of the barroom amid an astonished silence and went into his room. A few minutes later there came a tap at the door. He opened it, to find the old prospector who had talked to him standing outside.

He came in. "Say ,old-timer, you shorely are up again it," he remarked. "Mebbe you didn't know that Schmidt's all the cheese in these parts when Mr. Tallboys ain't here, and what Schmidt ain't Ohashi is. You take a word of advice from a friend, stranger, and pussyfoot it back whar you come from without waitin' for daylight."

Will laughed, and the old man looked at him and shook his head.

"Meanin' you aim to be goin' up?"

"That's the size of it."

"You goin' up to Uniak, like you said? Thar ain't no gold in the Uniaks nowise."

"Why, I've got a hunch there may be something in the Uniak district," answered Will, "and when I get a hunch I'm apt to follow it. Think that pair of birds is going to keep me from going where I want to?"

"Listen! Listen now, old-timer!" the old man laid a hand appealingly upon Will's arm. "You can't get there if you try. The Uniak region's closed, barred and bolted tight by the Company. Thar ain't a white person thar, exceptin' a schoolmarm who's a friend of Mr. Tallboys, and she's the only person he'll allow thar, mebbe because he ain't got to the p'int of monkeying with Gov'ment proputty yet. The Uniak's chockful of gold, mebbe—and mebbe not. If it was knowed for sure thar'd be a stampede that the Company couldn't keep out. But nobody knows. Nobody ain't seen color up this way. We only heard of it from others what hear of it. Savvy that?

"And now listen some more! Thar was a fool went up that way last fall after Schmidt warned him. He ain't back yit. And he ain't comin' back. The Eskimos brought word of what happened to him. They found him—pieces of him. Tore limb from limb by the cannibile man-devils up thar. Aye, laugh as you like, I tell you they've brought over man-devils from Sibery. Big human apes, white apes with hair on 'em like fleeces, and nine or ten feet high, and hides that'll turn a bullet at a dozen feet."

"Seen them?" asked Will.

"Seen 'em? Hell, no! Ain't I alive? But the Eskimos has seen 'em. Aye, laugh agen, old-timer, but if you'll take my advice you'll beat it while the goin's good, and not try to monkey with the Company."

IV

WILL did take the precaution to barricade his door with the chest of drawers that night, and to arrange a booby-trap consisting of his tin wash basin and pitcher over the window, so that its clattering fall would arouse him in the event of intrusion. But none came, and he woke at daybreak eager to take up his journey.

He was now more confident than ever that Tallboys was maturing some mischief in the Uniak region, and that it was not gold he was after. He was a little surprised at the resurgence of the story that Hughes had told him about the man-apes. He decided that Tallboys must be playing this card pretty strong, but he was surprised that the old prospector had fallen for the story.

He had no doubt as to his ability to obtain a sleigh and dogs from the Eskimos, and, without waiting for breakfast, he left the hotel and made his way in the direction of the Eskimo village. The sun was just rising, and the whole encampment was a babble of noise and confusion. Three prospectors were already harnessing their dogs, preparing to start on their southward journey. A totem pole, adapted from the Indians—for the totem is unknown among the raw Eskimos—told Will that this was a mixed band, and indicated which of the skin tents was occupied by

the head of the tribe.

A horde of wolfish huskies bayed at him savagely, slinking away with bared fangs as he drew near. To Will's surprise, the wizened little old chief, though he eyed his money greedily, refused to sell him any dogs. Although the bargaining had to be carried on in the sign language, that fact gradually emerged as the one outstanding result of the negotiations.

One moment, indeed, Will thought the old man was weakening. The tribe had gathered about them, looking on in silence. Suddenly a babble of throaty clicks arose among them. The chief hesitated. Then came a guttural outburst from behind the skin tent, and a withered crone emerged, holding one of her master's seal boots, which she was industriously chewing in accordance with the daily ritual of the Eskimo wife, while a volume of angry expostulation came from her throat.

Will showed her his bills, and a louder growl of negation answered this. He turned to others of the tribe.

"No dog! No dog!" the chief was working himself iito a frenzy. He pushed Will away, turned him round and pointed southward. "Dog Dog!" he reiterated, eyeing the bills greedily.

Will pointed north. "Dog!" he said. The fury of the chief became volcanic. Will shrugged his shoulders and withdrew, bayed by the pack to the limits of the encampment.

He realized now that the Company was omnipotent in St. Isidore, and that undoubtedly the Eskimos had already been warned.

The inability to obtain dogs and a sleigh should not keep him from Uniak, however. He resolved to make the journey there afoot.

HALF an hour later he left the hotel, quite aware of the interest that his departure excited, under the stolid indiffrence. He was glad when a turn of the beach trail hid St. Isidore from sight.

The first day's journey, which was along the shore, should take him, he calculated, to the south coast of the Uniak peninsula. Two days more ought to carry him to the north side and he should reach Uniak at noon. It was fairly easy going. The sandy foreshore was almost free of ice, the temperature not far below the freezing point. Will tramped all day at a steady gait, with brief intervals for rest and food. The sun was still some distance above the horizon when he reached the south shore of the peninsula.

Here the beach trail ended, and Will ascended the rocks to the plateau above. The snow lay deep here. He changed his boots for moccasins, put on his snowshoes and looked about for a camping place. Some distance ahead was a scattering of timber, and he chose a spot in a grove of spruce, with a windbreak of birch undergrowth.

Having thawed out a place in the snow, Will lit the little stove, made tea and, after a meal of pemmican and biscuit, followed by a pipe, he curled up in his coonskin and slept.

At daybreak he set off again, striking inland some distance to avoid a ridge of rocky ground. And suddenly he came on a packed sleigh trail, running undoubtedly between St. Isidore and Uniak.

A sleigh had passed along it within a few hours. What attracted Will's attention immediately was the fact that the imprints were of hoofs, not toes—deer prints instead of dog pads.

Two miles further on Will came upon the place where the occupants had camped that night. From the circular patch where the tethered deer had scuffled up the snow for moss, snowshoe tracks ran toward the sea.

His interest aroused, Will followed them.

But soon he saw the traveler had returned on his own trail, and the trail ended by the seashore.

Suddenly Will grew suspicious. The occupant of the sleigh had been searching for someone. He inferred that it contained either Schmidt or Ohashi or both of them, and that they had followed him with the intention of intercepting him, but had overshot their mark by a few miles.

If that was the case, the probabilities were that they would push on that day, with the purpose of turning back and intercepting him after dark.

In which case it was all the more evident that Tallboys had the strongest reason for excluding travelers from that particular section of the country.

He continued on that day, always in the half-expectation of a bullet from some point of ambush. Frequently he left the packed trail to reconnoitre. But when he stopped at noon, there were no signs of his enemies.

It was a little before sundown when he discovered the trap.

For the past four or five miles he had been plodding over a wind-swept barren, devoid of timber, except for a few patches of dwarf willow. Now he came unexpectedly upon a little hollow filled with a dense growth of tamarack and alder, an obvious camping place. Heaped up beside the trail, as if by chance, was a pile of dead wood, the bait by which he was to be induced to camp there that night.

On the left was a succession of rocky ridges extending toward the Uniaks. On the right was the same wind-swept barren. In front the trail ran up a gentle rise toward the skyline. Somewhere behind that rise Will felt sure that Schmidt and Ohashi were waiting for him, and for the dark.

V

APPARENTLY unconcerned, Will gathered an armful of the brush and deliberately made a huge fire, which, as night fell, sent up a ruddy blaze that must have given his enemies the signal of his presence.

He ate his meal, and then, it being almost dark, divested himself of his coonskin coat, heaping it on the ground over his pack. He tucked his boots artistically beneath the bottom edge.

Satisfied with this very passable dummy Will betook himself to the cover of the alder twenty-five yards away. Crouching behind a hillock, he waited.

Half an hour later a dark spot which appeared against the skyline resolved itself into a moving object which, by the aid of imagination, he made out to be a pair of reindeer pulling a sleigh.

Will chuckled. It was the reversal of the Santa Claus idea that tickled him. Two hundred yards away the sleigh stopped. Then two men appeared, moving through the shadows of the trees. He could have picked them off easily with his carbine—but that was not the way of a Government man.

Circling the fire, they passed within a dozen paces of where Will lay. The Russion had reverted to type—he wore the long shirt, under his mackinaw, hanging over his trousers. In his hand was the murderous knife he had wielded in the bar-room.

The Jap, trailing behind him, carried a revolver.

As soon as the pair had passed, Will began to writhe forward noiselessly from behind the clump of alders. The growth ran to within a dozen feet of the fire. Now the two men were within a few feet of the dummy, and Will, crouching low in the scrub, gripping his carbine was hardly a greater distance behind them.

Whispers followed as the two surveyed the imposture. To Will his simulacrum looked astonishingly lifelike in the all but complete darkness. Yet he was beginning to think that his trick had been discovered, the men tarried so long, whispering together.

But suddenly, with a long-drawn, guttural howl, the Russian plunged forward. He raised the knife on high and plunged it savagely into the coonskin. As he tried to withdraw it for another blow, however, the point caught in the hide, pulling the cover from the pack and revealing the imposture.

A yell of fury broke from Schmidt's lips. He stood staring stupidly at the pack. Will heard the indrawn hiss of the Japanese. Then suddenly Ohashi swung round, grasping his companion by the arm. His face mirrored alarm.

"Hi-yah!" he screamed, tense and alert as a lynx upon the instant.

His alert ears had caught Will's almost noiseless footfall behnd. As Ohashi pulled the gun from his belt, the Russian, whose reactions were slower, turned stupidly round. He saw Will emerging from the alders, yelled and, as Will raised his carbine, leaped forward, momentarily eclipsing his companion's line of fire, the knife gleaming in his hand.

Schmidt's reactions were slow but they were single, and his onrush was like that of a buffalo. Only a bullet straight through the brain would have stopped him, and Will had no intention of taking life if he could avoid it. He had just time to re-

verse his carbine, grasp it by the barrel, swing it on high and bring it thudding down on the great head.

His blow went true. Schmidt stopped in his leap, grunted and pitched forward, rolling unconscious at Will's feet, the knife falling from the relaxing hand.

At the same moment Ohashi fired three times, emptying his chamber.

He was only a few feet distant, but an excited Jap with a revolver on a dark night amounts to very little indeed, as Will know from experience. It was Ohashi who should have had the knife. One bullet plugged his cap and traced a skin-deep furrow along his scalp. The other two went wild. With a demoniacal yell, Ohashi sprang at him, but Will swung the carbine sidewise—a Jap's skull cracks like an eggshell in comparison with a Slav's—and laid Ohashi out cold beside his companion.

"You're a nice pair of birds," Will soliloquized, looking at the two prostrate figures.

He possessed himself of the knife and revolver, removed Schmidt's weapon from his belt and tossed it away, and then, adjudging that the pair were good for at least a half-hour's sleep, he left them lying there and made his way to the sleigh. The moon was rising, and in its light he was able to make an interesting examination of this—to him—novel manner of conveyance.

THE sleigh was a Lapp pulka of a type Will had never seen before. It measured about seven feet by two, was pointed in front and cut off square behind, with the seat in the back, and a deerskin stretched across the front part, which contained a space for baggage. The oddest thing about it, in Will's eyes, was that the bottom was rounded, like a boat, so that it evidently proceeded with a continuous rolling motion.

The two deer which were tethered to a tree by a long halter and were pawing away the snow more in a mechanical way born of habit than in the hope of finding moss, were large beasts, almost as large as stags, and of an indeterminate neutral grey, with whitish rumps and breasts and long hair on their throats like the bell of a moose.

Will's first impulse was to unfasten the deer and drive the sleigh up to his camping place. His second and much more emphatic one, was to leave it alone. Acting on this second one, he made his way back, to find the Russian still stretched out unconscious, and Ohashi sitting and looking dazedly about him.

The Jap stared at Will, then recognized him, seemed to remember what had occurred, and scowled. His hand dropped to his belt and came away empty. Will picked up his coonskin, looked at the long rent made by the Russian's knife, and put it on, scowling.

"You're a fine pair of birds," he addressed the Japanese.

Ohashi showed his teeth in a savage leer.

"Get up!" said Will.

The Jap obeyed in sullen silence, putting his hand to his face. Will now perceived that the lower jaw sagged; his blow had broken it.

"Get his feet," said Will, indicating the body of Schmidt. "I'll take his head."

The Jap obeyed. Together they raised the great form of the unconscious Russian, which sagged heavily between them. Even Will found it a burden, and the Jap was panting hard by the time they reached the trail.

"Get on!" said Will, nodding toward the sleigh.

Ohashi was game, though his broken jaw must have been causing him agony, and he staggered with every step he took. Between them they managed to deposit their burden in the bottom of the slight, pulling away the deerskin cover to make room for it. Will motioned to Ohashi to get in. His intention had been to bind him and to start the sleigh back in the direction of St. Isidore, but in view of the Jap's condition he decided that the precaution was unnecesary. There was no likelihood of the two attempting to make Uniak now.

He examined Ohashi's face. The bone was evidently fractured. Will bound up the jaw with a handkerchief, which was all he could do. The Jap would be in bad condition by the time he reached St. Isidore, but there should be someone there able to attend to him.

"I guess that bad medicine that you were speaking about fell your way instead

of mine this trip, Mr. Ohashi. By the way, what's this idea about keeping folks out of Uniak?"

Ohashi grinned viciously through his bandage.

"Verree big mistake go there, Mr. Hammond," he mumbled.

"Know me, huh?"

"Oh, yes, we know you."

"What you got up there? Natural gas?" asked Will.

Despite the pain he must have been suffering Ohashi gurgled, as if in great amusement.

"You drive us back to St. Isidore, Mr. Hammond," he managed to convey, "and then go home, and maybe all will be forgiven and forgotten, as you say."

"Ohashi, I guess you're about as hard-boiled a customer as Schmidt. I'll see you at Uniak, maybe, when your jaw's well."

"Oh, yes, we meet again if you live long enough" gurgled Ohashi. "But man-devils very savage in Uniak region," he grinned.

Will untethered the deer and handed the Jap the trace. The sleigh started. Will watched it till it disappeared behind the rise on the other side of his campfire, and curling up in his coat, slept, pistol in hand, till dawn.

VI

WILL reached Uniak early on the fourth afternoon, having met nobody on the trail. He was surprised at the appearance of the place. Instead of a typical Eskimo tent settlement, he found a street of neat wooden houses. At the end of the street was a larger building of frame, toward which Will directed his steps, conscious of the eyes that watched him from the windows.

As Will approached this building the door opened, and a dozen Eskimo children, looking incongruous in the garb of civilization, came pouring out. In the doorway behind them stood Miss Kenton.

She was about twenty-seven, not pretty, not plain, rather the type of the small town school-teacher, the conscientious kind, Will thought, as he looked at her.

She looked back at him in unmistakable agitation.

"Miss Kenton?"

"You're—you're Mr. Hammond?"

"I see you've heard of me."

"Yes, I—will you please come inside?" She dismissed the group of staring children and conducted Will into the school-house. Again Will was astonished. It was in all respects a modern American school, with desks and seats, maps, and a blackboard; and through a partly open door at the end Will saw a well furnished living-room, evidently Miss Kenton's quarters.

Miss Kenton went to this door, closed it, and came back, in deeper agitation.

"Mr. Hammond, I—I've been dreading this visit of yours. And my mind's made up. I'm not going to leave Uniak. And I'm not going to give up my school."

She went on: "This was a mission school before we became affiliated with the Government. Mr. Tallboys has supplied the equipment at great expense and trouble. You can't take it away from me. The Bureau can do what it pleases."

"Why should you suppose we want to take this school away from you?" asked Will.

"Mr. Tallboys has promised to stand by me and see that justice is done to these poor children," said Miss Kenton. "Four years I've worked in this vineyard, and I'm not going to—going to—"

She confronted Will defiantly through her tears.

"Miss Kenton, this is a misunderstanding," answered Will. "There is at present no intention of superseding you. I am merely here to look into conditions on behalf of the Bureau." This was true, if equivocal.

"You mean you—you haven't come here to take the school away? I understood from Mr. Tallboys that—"

"I assure you you are mistaken. The Bureau is appreciative of its best workers, especially in such a difficult field." Miss Kenton's face brightened. "And if that's all the trouble—is that all?" Will asked.

SHE took a step toward him, looking at him undecidedly.

"Mr. Hammond—Oh, there is a lot of trouble, and I don't know what to do!" she exclaimed, with a return of the same agitation as before. "Mr. Tallboys has been so kind. He's been a real friend to me and to my work. But he's got that

dreadful man Schmidt working for him, and that Japanese, Ohashi—And then the murder of poor Koononock. One of the best laborers in the field, Mr. Hammond—"

"I haven't heard of that. Tell me about it," said Will authoritatively, seeing that Miss Kenton was on the point of closing up.

"Why—it was about two months ago—in the hut at the south end of the range. They found him strangled and terribly mutilated by the man-monkeys," Miss Kenton shuddered.

"Miss Kenton, I've heard that story, but, of course, it's all nonsense," said Will. "There are no apes in this part of the world."

"There are!—I've seen them!" gasped Miss Kenton. And now Will realized that the girl's morbid condition of mind was the result of some shock that she had received. "It was one night two or three weeks ago. Mr. Tallboys had—had asked me—well, we'd had a little disagreement about something, and I had gone to bed miserable. I hear a noise at my window, and looked out and saw one of the man-apes looking in. I nearly died of fright."

"What did it look like?"

"An enormous human ape, with the most bestial expression you ever saw. It must have been nearly seven feet high."

"How was it dressed?"

"It—it wasn't dressed at all," Miss Kenton faltered. "It had fur like an animal, thick fur all over it. It looked into my window, and I screamed, and it disappeared. I've been ill ever since."

"Some native dressed in skins."

"No, it wasn't! I tell you it was one of the man-apes. My eyes are too sharp to be deceived like that. It was like a horrible man, with a beard up to its eyes, and hanging down to the middle of its body, and all covered with long fur.

"Oh, Mr. Hammond, there have been times when I've felt I dared not stay here any longer. Mr. Hughes wanted to take me out on the *Shrimp* last fall. But there are the children, and I can't abandon them, not even if the monsters catch me and kill me, like poor Koononock."

"Miss Kenton," said Will, "I want you, first, to look on me as a friend, and trust me. Will you? I'm up here to look into things, and I believe this mystery won't prove so difficult to unravel as it looks to you. My opinion is that these so-called apes are merely natives from another part of Alaska that Mr. Tallboys has brought over in order to intimidate the Eskimos. What is Mr. Tallboys doing up here?"

"He's going to build a salmon cannery," the girl said hesitantly.

"I know that story, Miss Kenton. Where is he now, anyway?"

"I don't know. He just comes and goes."

"Have you heard that he has quarters in any part of the Uniak Range?" Will went on.

Miss Kenton looked at him in a frightened way.

"I don't know—I don't know where his quarters are," she gasped.

"Tell me one thing frankly," said Will. "Are you on my side or his?"

"Oh, I don't know, Mr. Hammond!" she cried.

"He tried to set you against me?"

"I—he—"

"Miss Kenton," said Will, "I believe all this ape business was designed to drive the natives out of Uniak. And that will mean the end of your school. And I'm here to discover why. Will you facilitate my efforts, Miss Kenton?"

"I—yes, I will, if—"

"Then, Miss Kenton, you will regard me as the official representative of the Bureau. I intend first to look into the condition of the reindeer."

"You'll have to see Mr. Magnus, then."

"Who's he?"

"He's one of the original Finnish teachers who were brought over from Europe to instruct the Eskimos. But why—?"

She was looking at him with a return of the old suspicion when a tap at the door interrupted them. A man appeared on the threshold. A white man, short and of great girth, dressed in furs and high boots, his broad, beaming face surrounded by a fringe of reddish, grizzling beard like the rays of the sun.

"I'm yoost starting for the range, Miss Kenton," boomed this apparition. "And I've had a talk mid Ippenhook, and he's willing to coom."

"This is Mr. Magnus," said Miss Kenton to Will.

VII

OLAF MAGNUS'S deer were harnessed in the Siberian fashion. A loop of rawhide went over the left shoulder and passed between the forelegs, these loops being made fast to a single piece of rawhide that passed over a bent sapling on the front end of the sled runners. This gave the deer a curious sidewise motion, which was at first distracting. The round-bottomed *pulka,* which was loaded with supplies, rocked like a boat at sea.

Seated between Magnus and Ippenhook, the Eskimo, Will was thinking over his conversation with Miss Kenton. He took the story of the man-apes seriously now, though he did not believe in them. He was convinced that Tallboys had employed Indians dressed in furs to frighten the Eskimos out of the district. He knew the exaggerated terror among them of the mythical inhabitants of the interior.

What made Will realize how much he would have to depend upon himself was the fact that, when he glanced through the doorway leading into Miss Kenton's room, he had seen a radio receiving apparatus there. He was sure that this was the case: it was a receiving outfit and Will was confident that the person who communicated with the school-teacher was Tallboys.

As a result of a brief talk, Magnus had agreed to take Will out to the range and show him the deer and the methods in use. There were a number of huts, scattered over a large territory, supposed to be occupied by the Eskimo herders. But since the murder of Koononock, these had been abandoned.

The time for the spring round-up and branding was at hand, and Magnus had endeavored to persuade the Eskimos to return, but had only enlisted Ippenhook. Will, Magnus and Ippenhook were to work from different points and drive the deer into the corrals at Uniak, and Will meant to take the opportunity to try to locate Tallboys' base.

About a mile from Uniak they came upon a long line of fence-posts connected by a single, barely visible line of rawhide, about four feet from the ground.

"That where you're building your corral?" asked Will.

"Dat corral bane finished," Magnus grinned. "Hold all the deer in Uniak district. Dey see dat line of rawhide and dey t'ink dey can never yoomp it."

"You have to round up to brand, I suppose?"

Magnus turned in the *pulka* and pointed southward.

"Plenty soon de caribou come," he said. "All same as the deer, only bigger, wild fellows. Dey coom trou'gh here, t'ousands and t'ousands of dem, every year. Never stop for noddings. If the deer see dem, dey remember dey vas vunce vild, too, and go off mid dem and never come back."

They drove for an hour without sighting a deer. Presently Magnus's hut came into view. It was a substantial structure of logs. The deer were unharnessed, and Magnus went up to each animal, spoke to it and caressed it before releasing it into the corral behind.

WILL followed his host inside. The interior consisted of two rooms, with a little kitchen at the back, surprisingly well furnished. Ippenhook was preparing deer steak in the kitchen, and Will and Magnus sat down to an appetizing meal. Afterward they smoked their pipes together.

"Mr. Magnus," said Will presently, "I want to learn as much as possible about conditions here during my stay."

"Yah," Magnus puffed out a great cloud of smoke.

Will felt his way carefully. "I understand the deer have increased until there are too many for the Eskimos to handle."

Magnus took out his pipe. "Dat is true, sir. The vork has grown too big. But the land is never too big for the deer. Dese lands are good for millions of deer. Dere is food here for all the millions of poor peoples in the cities. The reindeer is the biggest t'ing dat has coom out of Alaska."

"That's the message I want to take back with me," said Will. He recalled his conversation with Hughes. Magnus had seen the same thing. The Finn had vision.

"It's got too big for the Eskimos."

"Dey are goot children, but only children."

"Magnus," said Will, "what is Mr. Tallboys doing in this district?"

But a veil seemed to film Magnus's eyes. "I do not know noddings about Mr. Tallboys," he evaded.

Yet the look in Magnus's eyes convinced Will that his question had gone home. However, there was no more to be said. He said good-night soon after, went into the adjoining room and lay down on his cot. But it was some time before he slept. He was convinced that Magnus could tell him a good deal.

Next morning they started for the hut on the south range. Noon brought them to the hut, which was a smaller variant of Magnus's. Making this their headquarters, during the next two or three days they drove over the range, rounding up bands of deer that had strayed from the main body, and gradually working them back in the direction of the rest.

IT was on the fourth morning, while Magnus was away, that Will, returning with Ippenhook from rounding up a few strays, discovered another sleigh in front of the door.

While Ippenhook was unharnessing, he went inside. A big man, with a short, fair beard, was sitting in a chair, smoking a cigar. Beside him stood Florence Kenton. As Will entered she looked round and started.

The big man rose and came forward with hand outstretched.

"Mr. Hammond, I believe?"

Will ignored the hand. "You are Mr.. Tallboys?"

"I am," said the other, with a smile.

"Then I have to tell you, if you are not already aware of it, that two of your employees, a Russian and a Japanese, made a murderous attack on me upon the trail up from St. Isidore."

Tallboys smiled. "I've heard all about that, Mr. Hammond. According to my information, my men strapped into your camp at night by mistake, and you laid Schmidt out with a rifle butt and broke Mr. Ohashi's jaw. They had a hard time getting home. Perhaps you fail to realize that the days of lawlessness in Alaska are over, even in the Uniaks."

Will felt it difficult to control his anger at this insolence. He raised his coonskin coat, displayed the knife-thrust. "That's what your man Schmidt did when he thought I way lying under this," he said curtly.

Tallboys smiled with ineffable condescension. Will felt boiling. He gripped himself into control. "I suppose you haven't come here to see me about that matter?"

"No, Mr. Hammond. I believe charges will be preferred at the proper time, and that you are reasonably sure to return via St. Isidore." He smiled again. "The Company, as you are doubtless aware, has police jurisdiction in the Uniaks."

"Will you state your business?" Will demanded curtly. "I suppose you've come on business with me?"

"You are partly correct, Mr. Hammond," answered Tallboys suavely. "My business, however, is merely to act as escort to Miss Kenton here. She has something to say to you."

He made a deferential movement toward Florence Kenton, who addressed Will in a nervous, high-pitched voice:

"Mr. Hammond, I find you have deceived me. Or perhaps we'll agree to say that I was under a misapprehension about you. You certainly gave me the impression that you had come here as Superintendent of the Bureau of Education. I now understand that you are merely on leave of absence, and that you have no official standing whatever."

"In a way that is true, Miss Kenton," answered Will, "but permit me to say that any information I may take back to the Bureau will certainly be utilized—"

"No, Mr. Hammond," cried Miss Kenton, disregarding him entirely. "I am informed that your commission as Superintendent of School and Reindeer Service was definitely cancelled by telegram before you left Seattle. I consider that I have been grossly deceived, and I must ask you to leave the Uniak district immediately."

AS she spoke she kept glancing up at Tallboys for approval. There was something almost grotesque in the way she sidled up to him. It was clear to

Will that she was completely under the man's control. Tallboys, reading Will's thoughts, stood watching him with a cynical smile.

"That sounds pretty final, Hammond, if that is your name," he smiled. "Of course it is no business of mine, but if Miss Kenton throws herself upon my protection it shall be accorded her. Let me make you a proposal, Hammond—if that's your name. Unless Miss Kenton objects, I think we can find room for you in the sleigh, and I shall be glad to drop you on the road to St. Isidore. And I'll guarantee no more coat-cutting on the way south," he added maliciously.

Will's hands were twicthing; in the old days the argument would have been cut short by gunfire before it had progressed anything like so far. He felt at a loss in the presence of the man's bland insolence, and all the while Tallboys was watching him with that smile of his.

Tallboys realized Will was on the point of an explosion. Suddenly he dropped his sneering attitude.

"Hammond, let me have a word with you outside," he said.

Will followed him out. Tallboys turned to him.

"Of course I understand your position, Hammond. But your presence here is damned inconvenient for me."

"If that's all—"

"No, that isn't all," said Tallboys softly. "Twenty thousand dollars within one minute, Mr. Hammond, merely to change your tourist plans. Let me drive you to St. Isidore and procure you a team of dogs there."

Will shook his head. That sort of thing was an old story with every Government man. Tallboys watched Will's face for a moment, then withdrew his hand from his pocket.

"That's all that needs to be said just now then, Hammond. You and I understand the rest. You're wanted for that assault on Schmidt and Ohashi, but I'm not playing policeman. Only, we may have to send a posse after you, if you decline to surrender. You may be killed resisting arrest. There are unpleasant possibilities. And the tundras are dangerous, with these apes roaming around."

He smiled. "In plain words, Hammond, you'll never leave Uniak alive. Better reconsider. No? Well—"

He nodded, and strode into the corral for his deer. Will went back into the hut. Miss Kenton was standing there—Will had almost forgotten her. She stepped swiftly to his side.

"I want you to stay!" she whispered, making a furtive gesture. "Pay no attention to what I said. I want you to promise me!"

Will nodded, and with another gesture, indicative of secrecy, Miss Kenton was gone. From the door Will watched Tallboys help her into the sleigh and tuck the robe about her.

He turned to wave his hand. "Goodbye, Mr.—it's Hammond, isn't it?" he called.

VIII

"MAGNUS, what game is Tallboys playing here?" Will had told Magnus, on his return, of Tallboys' and Miss Kenton's visit. He meant to force a showdown. "Magnus," he said, "I want you to be frank with me."

Magnus laid his pipe down. "Mr. Hammond, sir, I wish to do what is right," he said. "But the deer have always had enemies in Washington. There are still men who say dey cannot succeed.

"Fifteen year I live here, and the deer are like my children. I protect dem, at first from the wild beasts, den from the stupid Eskimos who vould have killed dem all for food. And now the Company—"

Will nodded. "Go on! What about the Company? Why are they here? What game are they playing here?"

"Dat question I ask myself when Tallboys coom driving about the range mid me for days togedder, last fall. And Schmidt and Ohashi, the Yap, dey coom mid him. And den dey try me, to see if I am honest man or no. Dey offer me fifty dollars to let them kill ten of the deer for food for deir Eskimos at St. Isidore. But I know dey do not vant the deer and do not mean to kill dem. Dey vant to see if Magnus is honest man or no. Vhat can I do but tell them no, dey cannot have the deer. Den Tallboys laugh and clap me on the shoulder. 'Now we

know you are honest man, Magnus,' he say to me.

"After dat I vatch, but I can do noddings, I say, noddings. Suppose dat Miss Kenton write to the Government, 'Magnus vas a goot man, but he is gedding old.' Vat den? I haf seen the herds grow from twenty deer to t'ousands, and den to nearly a hoondred t'ousand, here in Uniak. I haf seen food for de poor peoples in all the cities of the world."

He stretched out his hand and gripped Will by the sleeve. "Dis is a big vork. It is God's vork. He brought the deer into Alaska t'rough His minister, Mr. Sheldon Jackson. And now—a vomans is in charge in the Uniaks, a vomans living all alone mid a school of Eskimos, and in charge of all the deer. And when Tallboys cooms to her and speak soft and friendly—she is a vomans, you understand.

"And so I vait and vatch, and I go slow and speak like I vas stupid and I see noddings but vhat is before my nose."

"Well, but—you don't think that Tallboys has any designs on the herds, do you?" Will asked.

And even with his own utterance, suddenly illumination came to him, illumination so blinding, so convincing, that it left him stunned. Suddenly all his conceptions of the situation were revolutionized.

HE had held to the fixed idea that a raid was being planned on the seal rookeries. He had let that thought usurp his mind to the exclusion of all other possibilities. But what should Tallboys and his confederates, his backers in the United States, want with seals, with all the dangers to be risked in attempting a clean-up of the rookeries, when here were uncounted thousands of deer, roaming the tundras?

A clean-up of millions for the mere stretching out of the hand! Millions more than all the pelts of the Pribyloffs would bring!

"You mean that the Company is planning a raid upon the deer?" Will asked the Finn. "But—how will they dispose of the carcasses?"

"Listen, Mr. Hammond, you meet dot man Schmidt, the Roosian?" asked Magnus. "I see him droonk in St. Isidore two mont' ago. And he say mooch den dat he never say vhen he vas sober. He boast to me, because he is Roosian, and I am only a stupid Finn."

"Magnus," Will said, "you're right. The reindeer is the biggest thing that has come out of Alaska, and, by Heaven, we're going to keep it in Alaska!"

But the blank look had come into Magnus's eyes again. "It is too late. Vhatever dey do, dey do it soon. For veeks I guess vhat is cooming, and I can say noddings to Miss Kenton, because she vill not believe. She vould have gone to Tallboys to ask him is it true. So den I say to myself, I stay mid de deer, and I gif my life for dem if need be."

His eyes fell upon the Winchester standing against a wall. Will clapped him on the shoulder.

"It's not too late, Magnus. We'll get the deer rounded up and corralled, and there'll be you and me and Ippenhook, and maybe we can persuade the other Eskimos to join us. They'll fight for their own deer, once they see them in the corral. How many men has Tallboys got?"

"I never see or hear of any white men, only him and Schmidt and the Yapanese, Ohashi—"

"Ohashi's out of action for the present. I had a little argument with him, Magnus. You know the Eskimos. Do you mean to say they won't be willing to fight, when they understand I represent the Government, and that I'm on their side?"

"The Eskimos vill not fight," said Magnus somberly.

"Why not?"

"They are afraid of the ape-devils."

"What? Do you believe that story?"

"Dey have seen dem about their huts at night," said Magnus.

"Nonsense!"

"Ippenhook has seen dem and he is not a liar. Vhen he coom up here mid me dis time he say he know he vill never go home."

"But—you don't believe in them?" asked Will incredulously.

"The Yap Ohashi he bring devils over from his own country. Dat is not difficult. Dere are queer t'ings in Yapan."

"So you do believe in them, eh Magnus?"

Magnus let his eyes fall. And then

Will remembered that the Finns are the most superstitious people in the world. Magnus, too, believed the story, and that gave Tallboys half the victory.

Will said hardly anything more. In a few minutes Magnus finished his pipe, kicked off his boots, and lay down on his cot to sleep. Will followed suit. But now he felt himself growing more and more awake. Aagin he was thrilled by the magnitude of the conspiracy. If it was true—and he entertained no doubt that it was true—he was facing a bigger problem than even that of a sealing raid.

Will pondered over the problem until his eyes began to close. He dozed.

AN unearthly screech from Magnus awakened him. The Finn was sitting bolt upright in bed, staring at the little window, and shaking from head to foot. He sat there as if paralyzed, making no effort to move.

Will looked at window. The night outside was almost as dark as pitch—and yet he had the impression as if some round object pressed against the pane.

He leaped to his feet and ran to it. There, looking in, he saw something that for the moment made his blood run cold —a huge, bestial face, with shaggy hair, and a beard that grew right up to the eye-sockets, exactly as Miss Kenton had described. The upper portion of the body, so much of it as was visible, seemed to be covered with a growth of dense, matted fur. And natural hair of fur! Dark as it was, Will was convinced that this was no Indian masquerade.

Man or ape, then? Savage and bestial as the face was, Will thought it looked more human than animal, like some primitive and prehistoric race, the ancestor of the race—of the white race.

It was a white face, with the eyes of the Caucasian!

For an instant the little, savage eyes glared into Will's through the window. Then, suddenly, the face was gone.

For several moments Will stood there, palsied with horror at this apparition. Then he thrust on his boots, ran to the door of the hut, and opened it. There was no sign of any figure anywhere.

He went out and began examining the exterior. In the softer snow beneath the window he fancied he could discern what looked like the faint imprints of naked feet—human or ape-feet; but the rising wind was already beginning to drive the snow in whirls before it, and the faint tracks were already becoming obliterated.

He went back. Magnus still sat, shaking, upon the bed, and in the doorway of the little kitchen crouched Ippenhook, dumb with fear. Will went to Magnus and took him by the arm.

"You see, there's nothing to it, Magnus," he said. "Only a native prowling about the place, that's all."

Magnus looked at him dully without answering.

"You see, there's nothing to it," Will repeated.

But he knew that his voice did not carry conviction.

IX

MAGNUS was to depart for a day or two to round up the deer, Will remaining in the hut and helping Ippenhook. He told Magnus of his intention to spend a day or two on the range first, without indicating his exact objective.

In the morning Will harnessed two of the corral deer and set off.

He found that he could control the animals without difficulty, and in an hour or so had grown accustomed to this new kind of driving. The deer went well, and by nightfall he was among the foothills, where he staked out the animals and made his camp. The open tundra had now given way to a broken country intersected with gullies and numerous frozen streams, fringed with willow and alder. The mountain flanks were a mass of dwarf larch and spruce.

He slept warm in the sleigh, and in the morning, after hobbling the deer and turning them loose, he set out on snowshoes to make his reconnaissance.

For hours he climbed, beating to and fro, but each new summit only disclosed new peaks behind. At last, late in the afternoon, with a sense of complete defeat, he returned to his camp. Everywhere the heights seemed inaccessible. Nevertheless, in the morning Will set off again. He traveled miles that day, always to be brought up against the same preci-

pice, which ran like a wall straight in front of him.

In his ascent Will had worked his way round a great hump-like prominence on the flank of one of the mountains, and on his return, seeing the sleigh far below, and what looked like a short cut on the other side of the hump, he started to make his descent in this direction.

Beneath him was a long, narrow valley, so swept by the winds that it was snow-free in places, while the drifts were piled up deep against the flanks of the hills on either side of it. It was a prolongation like a tongue of the vast, level tundras, thrust in toward the mountains. Will had just reached the bottom when he saw that one of the patches of bare ground was covered with deer droppings.

But the more he looked at it, the more his astonishment grew. Thousands of deer must have passed that way at some previous time.

The entire tongue of land must at one time have been thickly packed with deer.

Then he saw the significance of his discovery. Not deer! That was the record of years of caribou migration.

He had stumbled upon the thousands of years old caribou trail into the Uniaks, along which the animals had made their way by instinct, generation after generation, into the valleys of the interior of the peninsula.

WILL harnessed the deer and drove straight toward the tip of the tongue, which grew narrower until it brought up hard against the mountain wall.

At its tip the valley was no more than five hundred yards in width. But Will could see no exit. And yet there must be one. Then, as he swept the scene with his glass, he saw something that brought a cry of excitement to his lips—a line of fenceposts extending clear across the narrowest part of the pass.

The posts extended from flank to flank of the hills and from each to the next was stretched a single line of rawhide.

Here, at this point, it was intended to check the migrating herds and turn their course.

But toward what point? The caribou could not double upon their trail, with the pressure of the thousands of the herd behind them. They would be diverted, squeezed like paste from a tube through some bottle-neck in the mountain wall.

Will left the sleigh and began to ascend the peak in front of him, to discover what he could in the brief period of daylight remaining.

At the top Will halted, spellbound. Before him, a scant six or seven miles away, he saw the level line of the sea, which he had thought far distant. The main range of the Uniaks tapered away southward. And between the spur on which he stood, and the mountain range, and the sea, completely enclosed by them, was a strip of level plain.

Will scanned it through his glasses, but it was growing dark now, and the sea fog was creeping in, blotting out the line of the shore. Still, the plan had grown plain to him. Somewhere near the tip of the tongue a pass ran through the mountain spur. Through this pass the rustled reindeer would pour into the strip of level land beyond, where they would be herded in a natural corral.

As Will turned to descend, of a sudden he became aware of a light shining low over the sea. Another light appeared; another; now a whole line of lights along the edge of the sea.

Then the inrolling fog reduced them to a mere luminosity on the horizon.

But Will thrilled at the sight. Tallboys's base was at last located, his secret was almost in his possession. Only the pass remained to be discovered.

X

THE first faint streaks of dawn were in the sky when Will awoke. He was half-buried under a heavy fall of snow which almost filled the sleigh.

Shivering in the keen wind, he cleared out the *pulka*, made himself some breakfast and, harnessing the animals, turned them back toward the hut on the south part of the range.

After the deer were corralled at Uniak, he meant to return and continue his investigations.

The snow came down heavily all that morning. Will would be lucky if he made the hut much before midnight. A halt at

mid-day, then on, while the snow fell ever thicker and the wind drove it in blinding clouds across the tundra.

Twilight was descending when, through the snow blanket, Will saw another sleigh coming toward him. Thinking it might be Magnus, Will turned toward it. He was nearing it when he heard a woman's cry ring out.

It was no squaw's cry, but a white woman's—Miss Kenton's.

At a distance of a score of yards Will saw two men and a woman standing up and struggling in the *pulka*. He leaped out, pistol in hand, and floundered through the thigh-deep snow.

The driving curtain saved him from the fusillade, to which Will did not reply for fear of hitting the girl. Now Will saw that there was a third man in the sleigh, driving the deer. The other two leaped out and rushed at Will. Under the parka-hood of the foremost he saw the face of the Russian, Schmidt. The second man was a breed. The second passed Schmidt; as he rushed at him Will fired point-blank. The breed dropped almost at his feet and lay there, a stream of blood from his mouth dyeing the snow.

Next moment Schmidt had sent Will reeling from a blow from his revolver butt. As Will slipped into the snow Schmidt snatched the automatic from his hand and pressed the trigger.

Will just managed to knock up the muzzle. He gripped the Russian by the wrist and hung on like grim death. Schmidt hurled his great bulk at Will, and together the two men went rolling over in the deep snow.

Will was no match for the Russian at close quarters. He felt Schmidt mastering him, saw Schmidt's revolver working toward his body. . . . Suddenly the snap of a pistol broke upon his ears. Schmidt's grip relaxed. He pitched forward into the snow and lay there, his hands twitching convulsively, face downward.

WILL sat up. In front of him stood Florence Kenton, a tiny revolver in her right hand, her features compressed into a look of desperate resolution.

Then of a sudden the girl dropped unconscious in the snow, at Will's feet.

He staggered up, regained his automatic, and carried Miss Kenton to his own sleigh, where he laid her down in the bottom. Going to the second sleigh, Will found a little, weazened old Eskimo, who, shaking with fear, attempted no resistance.

Will next turned his attention to the wounded breed. But the man, shot through the lungs, was already in extremis. There was nothing to be done for him, and Will went back to Schmidt. To his surprise he saw him sitting up in the snow, looking stupidly about him. A brief inspection showed Will that Miss Kenton's tiny bullet had glanced off the occiput, after inflicting an insignificant scalp wound.

Will took Schmidt's revolver. He relieved the Russian of his knife and threw that away. Then he jerked him roughly to his feet.

"You're born lucky, Schmidt," he said. "This is the third time, I believe. Our meetings sort of seem to end in the same way, don't they?"

Schmidt glared, but cringed. "You think I kidnap the girl?" he demanded sullenly.

"Well, if I were a jury, I'd convict on the evidence," answered Will.

"You got it wrong," Schmidt was regaining confidence. "That girl's crazy over Mr. Tallboys. She begged me to take her to him. Then she got scared. Now what you going to do?"

"Well, as war's not officially declared, I guess I'll have to let you go," Will told the Russian. "Next time we meet you'll get what's due you."

Schmidt waited for no second leave. With a scowl he made his way toward his sleigh. After a momentary glance at the breed, now lying quiet in the snow, he leaped into the *pulka* and a moment later the sleigh had vanished in the snowstorm.

Will stooped over the body of the breed and found it already nearly cold. He went back to his sleigh. Miss Kenton had recovered consciousness, and was sitting up. At Will's appearance she began to sob brokenly.

"I've killed a man! I've killed a man!"

As every attempt to console her only produced a fresh outburst of hysterics, Will at last desisted, and drove through

the storm, which was still increasing in violence. Hours passed, and Will had almost abandoned hope that the deer would find their way back to the hut, when he saw it looming up before him.

The animals stopped at the corral entrance, and Will descended.

"Come, get out!" he requested, giving the girl his hand.

Miss Kenton obeyed; Will pushed open the door. "Ippenhook!" he called.

No reply came. Will ushered Miss Kenton in, put the deer in the corral, and went back. He tried to light the oil lamp, but found that it was empty, and then remembered that there had been neither wood nor kerosene remaining. iHs electric torch refused to function. Groping his way into the little kitchen, he found a half-candle which he lit and carried back.

HE made some tea on his stove, and forced Miss Kenton to drink some. He brought in the sleigh furs and spread them on the cot.

"Miss Kenton," he said, "you must try to pull yourself together. There's nothing more to fear, and in the morning we'll start for Uniak—"

But the mention of Uniak set her to shuddering and crying again. It was a long time before Will could get a connected story out of her. What he at last succeeded in gathering was that, driving back to Uniak from the hut, Tallboys had asked her to marry him—not for the first time.

"He has been persecuting me for months past," Miss Kenton sobbed. "I told him that I had my duties, and never meant to marry. He laughed at me and said I'd change my mind before long. I told him I never would. I knew then how much I'd always hated him. He's a devil, Mr. Hammond, and capable of any villainy. And that night"—she shuddered—"the—the man apes got into Uniak. They killed three men. When I woke in the morning all the Eskimos were leaving, and taking their children with them. I locked myself in the school all day. I couldn't sleep the next night, I was in such fear. Every moment I expected to see one of the ape-monsters crawling through the window. But the night passed at last, and in the morning Schmidt knocked at the door.

"I wouldn't let him in at first, but then I recognized his voice and opened it. He told me that the apes were overrunning the country, and that Mr. Tallboys had sent him to take care of me and bring me to his camp. He said they wouldn't attack us in the open, but if I spent another night in Uniak they were sure to get me. He said they were so strong they could tear a door from its hinges.

"I was so terrified that I went with him. Last night, when we hadn't reached Mr. Tallboys' place I began to be still more afraid, but we stopped at a hut and Schmidt told me that we'd reach our destination tonight. But today, when it began to get dark, I couldn't stand it any longer, and when I saw your sleigh I screamed for help and tried to run to you."

Miss Kenton broke down in inarticulate sobbing again. But, disconnected and, in part, preposterous as her story seemed, it coincided pretty well with Will's own theories of what was happening.

He made her lie down on the cot, and sat considering what to do.

Miss Kenton's presence complicated the situation badly. Miss Kenton must come before the deer. Of that there could be no question. If only Magnus or Ippenhook would come!

Will sat there, while outside the wind howled and whistled about the hut. It was as cold inside as out, and the candle was guttering down. He went into the adjoining room. A gust of wind came through the ill-fitting window-frame and extinguished the last of the candle.

Will stopped dead on the threshold, his hand still upon the knob. Impenetrably dark as it was inside the room, his senses told him that it was not empty.

Softly he drew his automatic from his belt. He strained his ears—but he could hear nothing.

And then the tension relaxed. He knew that there was nothing to fear. This was no enemy. It was—a different kind of thing.

Softly Will closed the door behind him. The light that came through the tiny window was almost nil, but such faint light as there was shone immediately on the thing upon the floor, half under the cot,

half sprawling out toward the wall. Will bent over it. It did not move.

He struck a match and by the tiny flame he saw what he had by now expected.

It was the body of Ippenhook, the face horribly swollen into a puffed, waxen white, the eyes protruding. And around the neck of the Eskimo were the blackening prints of fingers.

XI

THE match went out. Will struck another one. He examined Ippenhook's body again. The Eskimo had been strangled—there was no sign of any wound upon him. But something in the tightly clenched fists attracted Will's notice, and he bent down to examine it.

It was tufts of coarse black hair, a number of them. It was tufts of hair, not of fur, and the dead man's tightly clenched fists were full of it, torn out in the desperate struggle that he had made for life.

But there was one particular thing about this hair that attracted Will's attention, and that was that it was wavy. Wavy hair does not exist among the apes, while the Indian or the Eskimo with a wave in his hair has yet to be born.

It was either the hair of a European or else that of some one of the aboriginal races of the earth.

Some sort of white savage of unknown origin? Or white men dressed in skins of hair? But Ippenhook's fingers would have torn off the hair skin of his assailant in his death-clutch, not plucked out two handfuls of hair from it.

The problem appeared insoluble. And while Will pondered, suddenly he became alert, even before he heard the sound as of something moving stealthily at the back entrance.

He listened. Above the roar of the wind he felt, rather than heard, that stealthy movement. He had set down his pack in the larger of the two rooms, and now he went in softly and secured the carbine. He filled the magazine. He filled one of his coat pockets with carbine cartridges, and the other with cartridges for his automatic, whose chamber he also filled. Then he went quietly to the kitchen door.

The back door of the shack was ajar, and he had closed it. The wind, blowing from the front, left the kitchen snow-free, but a whirl of snow was eddying about the sill. Had the wind blown the door open?

Will spun swiftly about. He had heard no further sound, nor could he certainly have distinguished any, for the wind was howling a wild threnody about the roof and walls. Yet, through the medium of that sixth sense, developed during his former life in the wilds, some imperative and instinctive warning had been conveyed to him.

As he turned, an immense, hairy body leaped upon him. In an instant he was engaged in a life and death struggle with his invisible assailant.

By sheer luck, one of Will hands closed round a hairy wrist. The fingers clutched a knife. That lucky grapple in the darkness saved his life. And now Will was certain that this was no ape's wrist that he held, but that of a human being.

In the darkness not the smallest glimpse of his antagonist was possible. But three of Will's other senses were intensely alert. He flung his whole weight upon that wrist, twisting it until he felt the bones give.

He heard them crack. The knife dropped to the floor. An inhuman shriek of pain burst from the creature's mouth.

Then from the larger room behind him Will heard Miss Kenton's answer with a scream of mortal terror. He heard her cry shut off abruptly, as if a hand had been clapped over the girl's mouth. There followed the sound as of the scuffling of naked feet over the boards of the flimsy floor.

IN the brief interval between the fall of the knife from his assailant's hand and Miss Kenton's cry, Will had seized his automatic. He thrust the muzzle against the monster's body and fired. A bellow burst from its lips again, and the huge, hairy, gorilla-like body swayed toward him, leaned on him, brushed him aside—and was gone, shambling out through the rear entrance of the hut, and filling the night with its awful outcries.

Will dashed back into the larger room.

Miss Kenton was moaning faintly somewhere in it, in a muffled tone. There came the same scraping of bare feet through the door. Suddenly the front door of the hut flew open. A wild gust of wind filled the interior with a cloud of snow.

Groping his way through it, Will felt Miss Kenton's dress, and the outlines of the hairy form that grasped her. He tried to aim, but the movement of the two struggling figures prevented him from firing.

The monster, dropping the girl, turned on Will with a snarl. Will remembered afterward that, without a particle of light, he seemed to sense their exact locations. It was that sense which made him stoop suddenly, so that the hand which held the knife struck high, colliding with his shoulder in a violent impact that sent him staggering backward. Will felt the keen edge of the blade bite through his coat and graze the skin beneath.

Next moment he had fired twice, and the creature dropped with a dreadful screech of agony, like the one in the kitchen.

The great limbs threshed the floor, resounding like the blows of a hammer, and making the whole shack tremble. Will stooped and picked up Miss Kenton, who had fainted, and lay unconscious at the side of the fallen monster. Gathering her in his arms, he groped his way back to the couch.

He was about to lay her down on it again, but with a sudden thought, instead, he placed her on the floor beneath it, where she would be out of immediate danger. He pulled the furs quickly off it and bundled the girl up in them.

He went back to the spot where he had shot the second of his assailants, struck a match, and, shielding it from the wind with his hand, looked down at the dying monster on the floor. His bullet had pierced the brain, and it was in its death throes. Even as he looked he saw the great limbs relax, a shudder shook the frame.

It was dead.

Only a second or two did the light last before a furious gust of wind extinguished it, but in that second Will's perplexities were solved.

THIS creature was no ape. It bore no resemblance to an ape—that is to say, the feet were human feet, the arms the length of human arms. It was a human being naked, save for the cloth about its loins—naked in that bitter Alaskan cold and driving storm, because, from ankles to eyes, the body was covered with a dense growth of hair.

Will knew what race it was. It was a hairy Aino, one of those aborigines of Sakhalin and the northern districts of Yezo and the Kuriles. Will remembered having read or heard somewhere of these primitive savages, supposed to be of the Caucasian race.

These savages, no doubt brought over by Ohashi, who could speak their language, being admirably adapted to existence in the Alaskan climate, so similar to their own, had been utilized, by a master-conception, to spread terror among the Eskimos and drive them from the district.

With this discovery, the remnants of that superstitious fear which even Will had felt, though he would never have admitted it, vanished. The horror that the ape-like creatures had aroused in him vanished, too. He turned from the dead savage—and in that same moment, almost simultaneously with the flaring out of the match, he saw that the door of the smaller room behind him was slowly opening.

In the doorway he saw another of the Ainos, a barely distinguishable shadow, slinking toward him. It must have gained admittance through the rear while he was rescuing Miss Kenton.

Will swung round and fired. The creature shrieked and stumbled toward him. He stepped aside and fired again. It toppled to the floor, the shriek cut short upon its lips, and remained there inert.

There were still more of them, then? Will backed into the smaller room. There was no entrance to this, save from the larger one, which had the front door at one end, and communicated at the other with the kitchen. His instinct assured him that the smaller room was empty, and from this doorway he had a viewpoint of any assailants at either entrance of the hut.

He waited, but not for long. Something was moving in the kitchen. He

fired, and a scrambling retreat followed. Then at the front door. It opened, and Will fired again. He leaped forward, fired out into the storm, and closed the door once more. There was no lock or bolt for fastening it.

He recharged his magazine. A fierce wrath had begun to burn in him at the trap that had been laid. Another scrambling at the kitchen door, lost in the howl of the wind. Will's bullet thudded into wood and a snarling, shrieking rush followed. The door seemed to be thrust forward, hurling Will to the ground. Two of the Ainos had advanced, holding the heavy kitchen table in front of them as a protection.

As he fell, one of the savages leaped on his shoulders, stabbing at him with his knife. The blade laid his cheek open. Will fired, and the man dropped. The other, caught under the falling table, was gripping him by the legs. Somehow Will succeeded in disentangling himself from that welter. His second assailant, evidently struck by one of his bullets, padded, howling, through the kitchen again. Will rose to his feet in time to meet the expected rush from the front.

HE fired blindly again and again, hearing the thudding impact of his bullets into flesh. Then he was struggling in a press of furry legs and arms. A knife thrust seared his upper arm like a running-iron. And that battle in the dark was like a half-forgotten nightmare to him for ever afterward—a confused remembrance of the heavy, fetid bodies, the hissing breath, the death-grunts of the falling savages, their howls of agony, making the shack ring like a haunt of a legion of demoniacs, and quelling even the furious, raving wind without.

In the dark and confusion they stabbed each other with their knives. Dying, they pulled each other down. Now Will was lying prone under a pile of writhing Ainos, living, dying, dead; now he was on his feet again, firing once more, till the click of his automatic told him it was empty.

But like a pack of great apes the Ainos were scrambling to safety through the front way again. Once more the place was empty. The shack smelled like a slaughter-house. Will groped, found one of the bodies, dragged it to the door, and hurled it out into the snow. Another. Another. This one was still writhing. This one bit at him and tried to drag him down. Will remembered the Aino he had shot at the back door and pulled the body out from beneath the fallen table, carried it to the front, flung it out among the others.

Then he picked up the heavy table and, staggering with it to the front entrance, placed it against the door as a barrier against the man apes.

He recharged his automatic mechanically. He leaned against the wall of the shack, covered with blood from his assailants and bleeding from half a dozen wounds of which he was unconscious, panting heavily, his pistol in his hand, ready.

XII

MINUTES went by. What deviltry were they planning now? Nothing was now audible except the wind, which seemed to have passed the summit of its fury, and to be decreasing in violence. Will barred the door again, went back to his vantage point, and waited.

A dreadful cry that would have struck terror into the heart of anyone who had not already gone through that inferno of slaughter. And in spite of that Will shuddered as he listened to it.

Half an hour must have passed. It could not be long now till dawn. But with dawn came death. Will knew that his only chance lay in getting away under cover of the remaining darkness. And with that the possibility materialized in his mind. In that darkness it might be possible to get the deer out of the corral, if they had not been slain or driven out, harness them to the sleigh, and take Miss Kenton away.

At first it seemed a desperate chance, then the only possible one. And then enthusiasm came to him at the thought of it. Cautiously he crept to the rear entrance and stepped outside. But there was little need of caution, for instantly he was completely enveloped in the white curtain of the blinding snow-storm, and

about him was impenetrable darkness. The wind, lessening though it was, all but swept him off his feet.

He stumbled over something, half-buried in the snow, and found it was the frozen body of one of the Ainos, probably the one whom he had first shot in the kitchen. Then, groping along the corral fence, he found the *pulka* where he had left it.

Will went into the corral. He was convinced that the deer had been driven away. But he found them yarding under the shelter, their faces to the wind, and they did not attempt to scatter when he approached them. Evidently the Anios had not considered the possibility of the ruse that Will was planning. He threw the harness over his shoulder, led back one of the deer, and attached it to the sleigh, then another.

Then, returning to the shack, Will carried out, first his pack, and then Miss Kenton, placing her in the bottom of the *pulka,* and wrapping her about with the furs. Her face was cold as ice, but the slight movement of her breast beneath his hand told him that she was alive.

Will completed the harnessing. At last they were started. The deer, now visible in the increasing light, moved stiffly, spreading their padded feet over the snow. Miss Kenton stirred, sat up, moaned.

"Where am I?" Who are you?"

Will bent toward her, raised her, and drew her into the seat beside him. "It's all right, Miss Kenton. We're on the way back to Uniak now."

She shuddered. "I thought the man-apes came into the hut and—"

The shock seemed to have driven the remembrance from her mind. It seemed a dream to her.

"You've had a good sleep in the hut," Will told her. "And everything will be all right now."

"But we can't go to Uniak. The man-devils—"

"Miss Kenton, trust me, and I'll take care of you. Do you think you can put your fears aside and just do that?"

She looked at him doubtfully for a moment. "I think I can," she said, with a calmness that surprised Will. "And, after all, there's nothing else to do, is there?"

A rise in the ground had hidden the hut from sight. Thank the good Lord they were leaving that scene of horror forever behind them. It was quite light now, and the wind had almost died away. The snow was ceasing.

Suddenly, as they topped another small rise, Will perceived a sleigh drawn up squarely in front of them. Miss Kenton saw it, too, and uttered a cry. Will pushed her down in the bottom of the *pulka,* turned diagonally, and took up his carbine. He could see three men in the sleigh.

The whine of a bullet overhead, and the crack of a rifle, made Will pull in the deer abruptly. A second crack, and one of the deer stumbled. Blood from its hindquarter began to stain the snow.

Miss Kenton kneeled up in the sleigh. Will tried to push her back.

"No," she said in a composed voice. "They've got us. You'd better surrender. I'll beg your life of them."

Will was astonished at her coolness. The hysterical Florence Kenton seemed suddenly to have disappeared.

"Lie down!" he cried.

"No," answered Miss Kenton, now standing up in the bottom of the sleigh.

Will pulled the deer around and urged them back behind the crest of the rise. As he did so the wounded deer plunged again. The second deer toppled sidewise in the harness, recovered itself, and broke into a furious gallop, dragging its companion with it. It was evident that the three were shooting at the deer.

But they made the shelter of the rise before the second deer dropped dead in the harness. Will leaped out and cut the animal free. He went to the crest.

The three men had left the sleigh, and, extending in open order, were advancing toward him. Will fired at the middle man, and missed. He kneeled down in the snow. A volley of bullets passed over his head.

Then the middle man detached himself from his companions and came forward, waving something. He was coming on alone. Will kept his rifle ready, and waited. Once he glanced quickly back, to see Miss Kenton sitting apathetically in the *pulka,* as if she had abandoned hope.

OF the three men, the one on the right was coming on slowly behind the

middle man, who was now within seventy or eighty yards, and waving what looked like a white handkerchief. The man on the left was hidden behind some rising ground. Will expected a trap, but there was an open space of a dozen yards or more which the man on the left must cross to reach him, and he kept his eyes turned in this direction.

Now he could see that the middle man was Ohashi, a bandage round his jaws, under the hood of the parka. He came steadily forward, his hands in the air.

"Keep your hands up; I'll fire the minute you drop them!" Will shouted to him, still watching the open space to the left of him.

Ohashi came to within twenty paces and stopped. He called a salutation through his closed jaws.

"Hi-yah, Mr. Hammond, you verree clever man, but we got you now. How you like the man-devils, Mr. Hammond?"

"Your Ainos are a husky lot, but they lack guts," answered Will. "Touch them, and they start bellowing."

Ohashi snickered. He came six paces nearer. "You too clever to fool, Mr. Hammond. Listen! No need to kill you. We go away soon, and then you go where you please, do what you like. Go find that natural gas. You come with me, no harm done you or Miss Kenton, on word of honor of Japanese gentleman. What you say?"

"I'll give you twenty minutes to get out of rifle range, Ohashi."

"Hi-yah! What you do now your deer gone, eh, Mr. Hammond?"

"Don't worry about my deer."

Ohashi was stalling. Will knew that from his furtive look. He grew more and more suspicious of the man hidden on his left.

"Get out!" he ordered, raising his carbine.

Instead, Ohashi stepped forward, and a stream of appalling filth poured from his lips. He shook his fists in Will's face, screaming unspeakable insults.

Will stepped toward him, raising the stock of his carbine. And at that moment the lariat, flung by the man on his left, settled about his body, slipped down, and drew his arms to his sides. Too late Will saw the trap. He swung about, but he was powerless to aim the carbine, though he was still grasping it desperately.

He struggled furiously as the noose tightened, but in vain. The breed, having attached it firmly about the rock, came forward grinning. Ohashi and he flung themselves upon Will and bore him to the ground. They relieved him of his carbine and automatic. They emptied the remaining cartridges from his pockets. They produced ropes and bound his feet together, and his wrists to his ankles, leaving him trussed and helpless.

As they picked him up and carried him down the rise toward their sleigh, Will had a glimpse of Miss Kenton, still sitting apathetically in the *pulka*, as if frozen with fear.

THEY flung Will into the sleigh and started the deer back toward the shack at a gallop, leaving Miss Kenton sitting there. The sun was rising when they came within sight of the hut again. All about the front entrance lay the bodies of the dead Ainos. The snow was trampled into a slush of blood. Ohashi snickered.

"You ver-ree smart man, Mr. Hammond, but this is your finish," he said.

Will did not answer. They carried him inside.

Blood everywhere about the floor and the walls, and the fetid stench of the Ainos still filling the interior.

They entered the smaller room. Ohashi grunted when he saw Ippenhook's body, and kicked it under the cot. The Japanese and the breed laid Will down on it. With the ends of the ropes they made him fast to the iron framework.

"Good-bye," said Ohashi, with a mocking wave of his hand.

The two men disappeared outside. After a short interval Will heard the sleigh being driven away.

For a moment or two he lay still, hardly believing it. Had they not meant to kill him? Was he to be left there to starve to death, or to be turned over to the tortures of the savage Ainos?

Will began searching his bonds. Suddenly his attention was fastened upon a crackling sound in one corner of the hut. A wisp of smoke blew in from the larger room, followed by a line of fire.

Then he understood the death that had been planned for him. The Japanese meant to obviate all awkward evidence such as might be afforded by a body frozen, and, therefore, preserved, and showing knife or bullet wound. Awkward evidence against the company and its representatives, in case it were discovered. Whereas a fire might have been the result of carelessness or accident.

The tinder-dry hut was going up in a blaze. The smoke came pouring in.

Will strained madly at the ropes which bound him. They gave, but not enough to afford him any leeway. If only he could work his hands loose enough from his ankles . . . but he was trussed helplessly, and now the smoke was stifling him, and the flames, fanned by the residue of the wind, were roaring all along the wall. The heat was growing infernal. The dense volumes of smoke were stifling him.

Half-conscious now, Will shouted at the top of his voice, struggling with all his might, in vain, against the ropes, which cut deep into his wrists and ankles.

His struggles broke down the framework of the wooden cot, which collapsed upon the floor. For an instant he breathed more freely there. Then the line of fire ran in, the blankets began to smolder. The smoke rolled down.

His lungs were bursting. A fiery wheel seemed to revolve round and round inside his head, and he felt his senses leaving him. With a last cry he sank into unconsciousness.

HE had a dim impression of hearing an answering cry, of being raised and carried into the outer air.

Then, with the drawing in of a great chestful, consciousness returned to him. He opened his eyes, to find himself free of his bonds, and lying on his back upon the snow, with the blazing hut behind him, and a *pulka* with two deer harnessed to it, standing near and Magnus bending over him.

He stared into the Finn's face for a few moments before he realized what had happened. Then he struggled up painfully, chafing his wrists, which were bruised and swollen by the rope.

He looked at Magnus, at the body of Ippenhook, which the Finn had carried out of the hut—at those of the dead Ainos, stiff in the snow, and at Magnus again.

"I coom dis way and hear you call," Magnus explained, "and den I see dem driving away. Night before last dey burn down the east hut, too. So I guess dey try to do somet'ing here. You fight dem devils, eh?" he continued, kicking the body of the nearest Aino.

"I fought them all last night, with Miss Kenton in the hut," answered Will. "I saved her from that man Schmidt," He recounted the story briefly. "We must go after her and save her," he added. "I was fool enough to let Schmidt go last night after rescuing her."

Magnus grunted.

"It's over there they trapped me," Will continued. "They left her over there. No doubt they went back for her, but we must go there and make sure."

Suddenly he remembered that the pack had been left lying there. He fumed with impatience while Magnus brought out a pair of snowshoes from the corral. He handed Will a revolver and a handful of cartridges.

"I brought dem for Ippenhook," he said. "But them devils got him, eh?"

"I found his body when I got back to the hut last night," said Will. "You see, Magnus, they're not devils. Just men with hair on their bodies. They're from Japan. I've heard of them before."

Magnus shrugged his shoulders, as if not entirely convinced. During the short drive to the place where Will had had his encounter with Ohashi, he narrated briefly what had happened to him. He had been driving in the deer, had seen a blaze in the sky, and found the east hut burned down. Suspecting from this that it was planned to murder Will and Ippenhook, he had made his way to the south hut by a detour, and arrived just in time to see the conflagration, and Ohashi driving away. He had heard Will cry out, and arrived in time to rescue him.

REACHING the ridge, they found the *pulka* empty, and both reindeer dead. But Will's pack had not been touched. Its contents had not been suspected.

"Magnus, we must start at once after Ohashi," he said. "He's the man we want."

But Magnus was looking at the deer, which were showing a strange restiveness. Alert and tense, with ears thrown back and widened nostrils, they stared out over the tundras, pawing the ground and quivering with eagerness.

Suddenly an oath burst from Magnus's lips.

"Yoomp in!" he cried to Will.

Will, looking in the same direction so that in which the Finn had been looking, now saw, in the far distance, something looking like a thread of black appear suddenly on the horizon.

"Yoomp in!" cried Magnus again.

He was holding in the pawing deer with difficulty now, and his cry was a sharp command. Will flung his pack into the sleigh and jumped in. Magnus turned the deer's heads. He jumped into his seat, picked up a long whip of rawhide, and began to lash the animals unmercifully.

The sleigh started at a right angle across the tundra. The deer swerved. Magnus stood up in his seat, yelling and plied the whip with all his might. The deer dashed, snorting, in a straight line across the snow.

Looking back, Will saw what looked like a vast herd of reindeer bearing down upon them. In front of this were a few straggling groups. Magnus was attempting to get out of the way of the advanceing herd, to strike a course toward its flank.

He yelled and plied the whip incessantly, and yet Will could see that nothing else would have held the animals on their course.

"The caribou come," he cried to Will, without turning his head. "All the deer go mid dem. We lose everyone of dem now. Sit tight in the sleigh till we see if we can get oud of the vay of the herd, otherwise dese deer go mid dem, too."

And now at last Tallboys' trump card was laid down, and everything was clear. That was how he meant to herd the reindeer into the pass—by holding them on the range till the wild caribou came. And the caribou, in their thousands, and the reindeer, in their thousands, too, would sweep down the tongue of the valley, swerve from his rawhide barrier, and enter the pass, to herd together in his shambles.

Magnus still plied the whip. But now the leading bands of the moving herds were already approaching, sprawling splay-footed over the snow, which had frozen on top of it with their broad, spreading hoof-pads. A great black flood, moving across the tundra at their tireless, shambling gait, almost with the speed of a trotting horse, a flood that would not slacken until it had reached its destination.

In front of them, not far away, was a ridge of broken ground, with a low fringe of willow along the banks of a frozen stream. This, Will could see, was the objective that Magnus was trying to gain. Once behind this, if they could manage to restrain the deer, they could rest and let the herds go by.

Magnus, standing up in the sleigh, plied his whip and yelled like a maniac in his endeavor to force the deer across the converging front of the oncoming herds in time. Slashes of blood appeared upon the animals' flanks. They galloped wildly, plunging in the traces, their hoofs hammering on the front of the *pulka*, which trembled and virbrated as if it threatened every instant to go to pieces under the buffeting.

ON came the flood, without swerving, and Will caught his breath as he realized their danger. Caught beneath those hundred thousand hoofs, nothing could save them, nothing would be left of them. But the broken land was near, they were already almost on the flank of the herd, which was coming down on them with fearful momentum. Magnus threw his last effort into his task.

The *pulka* bumped over the rocky ground, the deer strained madly against their harness—then of a sudden the sky, and the snowy ground seemed to have become commingled.

Will after an instant of unconsciousness, found himself sitting on the ground beside his pack. Near by was Magnus, among the debris of the broken sleigh.

Galloping back to join the herd were the harnessed deer, trailing the fragments of the wrecked sleigh behind them.

Magnus disengaged himself and came

up to Will. "Vell, dat is the end," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Not the end, Magnus. That's just the beginning," answered Will.

Magnus, without replying, stood looking down at the herd as it poured by, his shoulders hunched dejectedly. It was the loss of his life work, for him the end of everything. The vast aggregation of caribou and reindeer, the former easily distinguished by their greater size, but all intermingled, was spreading over the plains in a black torrent, as far as the eye could see.

The Finn looked back at Will hopelessly. Will took him by the arm.

"Listen, Magnus," he began.

And he explained to him Tallboys's stratagem. He told him of the pass and the rawhide fence. At first Magnus listened in hopeless apathy; then, little by little, his eyes began to brighten.

"Magnus, we've only got to follow the trail of the herd to find the entrance. I don't know what we can do when we get inside. I don't know how many men Tallboys has. It sounds like a desperate undertaking. But it's got to be done. And we've got the element of surprise in our favor. Our arrival is the last thing that gang will be expecting, and we can take them by surprise, I believe you and I can wipe them up. And we've got to save Miss Kenton. Are you willing to try it, Magnus?"

Magnus threw back his shoulders. "I donno about dat Kenton voman, Mr. Hammond," he answered. "But I told you vunce I gif my life for the herd. Dis is the day dat I see cooming for so long. Now I will do vat you say. Maybe God don't mean to have His vork busted in dis vay, after he sent the reindeer here, and you, too, Mr. Hammond."

XIII

FOR hours the herd continued to pour on its way toward the mountains, and for hours Magnus and Will plodded along its flanks, striking toward the pass. By afternoon the living torrent had flowed past them leaving its imprint of innumerable hoof-prints behind it.

They plodded on steadily throughout the day, camped at sunset, and started off again at dawn. About the middle of the afternoon they reached the tongue of land extending into the hills.

Here the deer and caribou, packed into the narrow strip between the hills, had swept the ground clear of snow, in the manner of a snow-plough, piling it up on either side. Straight the trail led to the rawhide barrier.

Here was confusion. Even the frozen ground had been churned into hillocks by the frantic beasts as they broke from that unknown and terrifying sign of man.

The trail now ran apparently straight toward the lower peaks.

The valley narrowed constantly. They began to pass the bodies of smaller or weaker deer, crushed almost flat and stiffening along the trail. More of them, then a bellowing reached their ears, and rounding a defile, they came upon a solid wedge of dead and dying beasts, forming a barrier twelve feet high or more.

Here and there maimed deer were scratching in the snow, or standing with drooping heads, some with broken limbs, some horribly distorted, with dislocated shoulders and crushed ribs.

Magnus began cursing as he passed them. He turned to Will.

"By Heafen, we get dat Tallboys, Mr. Hammond!" he swore. "Dem deer—dem beautiful deer—"

He broke off, sobbing. The sight of the maimed animals had affected Magnus as nothing else had done.

They scrambled over the barrier of dead and dying beasts, avoiding the convulsive movements of the formidable horns. Will cried out. Straight in front of them ran a narrow pass right into the heart of the mountains, and every yard of it was lined with dead or dying animals, while the rocky walls were plastered with flattened bodies, pinned into their interstices by the crush of the frenzied animals.

Then the valley began to widen. Suddenly Will stopped and drew back, pulling Magnus by the arm.

From the projecting boulder immediately in front of them they could see the end of the defile, and the spreading plains beyond.

The sun was setting. They waited for darkness. Will charged his revolver and

counted his remaining cartridges. There were eight of them. Magnus pulled out another handful from his pocket and gave them to him.

"By gosh, we get dat Tallboys!" he muttered again between his clenched teeth.

THE sun went down. Darkness began to steal over the land. At length they moved forward cautiously to the end of the defile, gripping their revolvers. Will had expected to find some sort of guard-house there, but the exist of the pass was unprotected.

There was nothing but a double strip of rawhide, stretched on posts from one rocky wall to the other.

That would suffice to prevent any stray animals from escaping, and the intelligence of the herd would not rise to the conception of returning on its tracks, even after the butchering had begun.

As the two stood there, at the end of the pass, a light sprang up beyond the plain—another and another, until there was a cluster of brilliant illumination, apparently no more than three or four miles away.

"I guess the factory's getting ready to work overtime," said Will.

They made their way in the direction of the lights. Here and there groups of deer or caribou appeared out of the dark and scampered away. They had the feel of the thousands of animals, ranging and milling restlessly all about them. There must have been a hundred and fifty thousand of the wild and the tame, enclosed within the coastal strip of not more than twenty-five square miles.

The lights began to dim as the sea fog crept in. Now they were a mere luminous blur in front of them. For an hour Will and Magnus picked their path over the tundra. Then Magnus stopped and pointed.

Two lights were moving slowly out of the patch of illumination. The fog swallowed them.

"Ship going out," said Will.

They went on. Now, suddenly, the lights grew clear again. They saw the outlines of buildings in front of them. One of these, the largest, was lit by scores of electric bulbs. The sound of the surf came to their ears.

They came upon the pens and runways, an intricacy of paths. It was clear that on this remote shore Tallboys had built a regular packing plant. The whir of dynamos was heard.

Magnus stopped suddenly and pulled Will down behind one of the pens. Out of the fog came the voices of men, chattering in Eskimo. As they passed it could be seen that they were Eskimos, a dozen of them, apparently on their way to work on the night shift. They passed.

"Those are not the men from Uniak?" Will whispered.

"No, dose men from Iquit, all of dem," answered Magnus. "Tallboys bring dem here last fall to vork for him."

WHEN the party had disappeared in the distance, Will and Magnus continued their investigation. Another building loomed up before them out of the night, a squat, low tower, square in shape, and apparently half-buried beneath the ground.

It appeared to contain two stories, the lower one, below the level of the ground, illuminated, the upper one dark. Something projected from a niche in the crown. Will looked at it and uttered an exclamation.

It was a field-piece, pointing seaward, and its presence showed more conclusively than anything could have done the desperate nature of the game on which Tallboys was engaged, and the magnitude of the stakes.

They circled the tower and found the entrance on the opposite side—a flight of steps down to a heavy door made of square beams and several inches thick. The tower itself seemed to be built of stone and concrete, actually a fortress.

"I guess this is their headquarters, Magnus," said Will. "The question is, how to get in."

The problem was opportunely solved at that moment by the rattling of the internal bolts as they shot back. A breed appeared, and stood in the entrance and looked out.

He swung around, to look into Will's revolver. His hands shot up, his eyes went wide with terror. It was evident he knew who Will and Magnus were.

"Where's Tallboys?" Will demanded.

The breed returned no answer. but his

swift glance toward the interior, which was lit by a single large bulb, supplied it.

"Keep him here, Magnus. "I'll go and see," said Will.

He went softly along the hall until he came to a door. There were two other doors, but the first one was slightly ajar. Looking in, Will saw that the interior was furnished as a combination office and library. Another room connected with it at the rear.

As Will stood there he saw Tallboys and Miss Kenton enter it from an interior room. They were talking.

Will took three steps into the room and covered Tallboys. "Throw 'em up!" he commanded curtly.

Miss Kenton startled and uttered a piercing scream. Tallboys, with a smile, put his hands above his head.

"Very smart, very smart, Hammond—if that's your name," he jeered.

Will, without letting his revolver waver, called to Magnus, who came in, driving the breed before him.

"Look through these rooms, see if you can find a rope or something, and we'll truss these men up," he said.

MAGNUS nodded, and began driving his prisoner like a sheep before him into one of the inner rooms. Imediately Will heard a sound as if he were tearing up a sheet.

"Hammond," said Tallboys, "I've reproached myself two or three times with not having made a harder effort to persuade you to throw in your lot with us. Is it too late, Hammond?"

Will, listening to Magnus, did not reply.

"It's really a very simple proposition, Hammond," continued Tallboys, "and you're making no end of unnecessary trouble for all of us. You've discovered something of the scope of our work here, no doubt. I may say that that twenty thousand I offered you is a mere—"

"Cut the palaver, Tallboys," said Will advancing and frisking his prisoner, who yielded a formidable automatic pistol from a slung pocket under the right side of his coat. "Miss Kenton," he added, "if this fellow has harmed you . . ."

"No, he hasn't, he hasn't!" cried Miss Kenton hysterically. She had been standing like a statue at Tallboys' side from the moment of Will's entrance. Now she stepped toward him. "Take me away—take me away from here!" she begged.

She clung to Will so desperately that it was all he could do to keep his weapon level upon his captive, who still stood facing him with that cynical smile upon his face. He had to thrust the girl from him almost brutally.

Magnus appeared in the doorway of the inner room, bearing in his hands long strips of sheets, twisted to the thickness of ropes.

"I got dat feller tied so I guess he won't get away," he grinned, looking from Will to Tallboys. A scowl crossed his face. Will knew it was hard for the Finn to abstain from violence. "I guess dis will hold dat damn butcher," he added with a threatening gesture.

"I was afraid of earning honest Magnus's ill-will by driving off his reindeer," said Tallboys with a satirical grimace.

As he spoke he was sidling step by step, toward his desk. At a distance of a foot or two from it Will stopped him.

"Stand where you are!" he commanded. "Tie him up, Magnus, and put him with the breed!"

Tallboys held up his hand.

"One moment Hammond," he said. "You understand the proposition that I made you. Am I to understand in turn that your principles definitely forbid you to—?"

"Don't worry about my principles, Tallboys," Will growled. "You'll have a chance of explaining yours when we get to a Government post."

Tallboys took another sidewise step. Suddenly he reached out his hand and pressed a button on his desk.

"Now go ahead and do your worst, Hammond!" he snarled. "Shoot, damn you, shoot!"

XIV

WITH a sudden motion Miss Kenton flung herself upon Will. "Don't kill him!" she cried. "I—I couldn't bear to have him killed. He hasn't harmed me. Oh, leave him here and just take me away!"

"Get busy, Magnus," said Will, again

thrusting the schoolteacher away. "I guess that signal was for the gang."

Within the space of a minute Magnus had trussed Tallboys with a succession of sailor's knots that held him almost immovable. They carried him into the interior room, the bedroom from which the sheets had been taken. The breed, trussed similarly, sat scowling against the stone wall. They looked about them: there appeared no exit.

At Will's nod Magnus put Tallboys down on the bed and fastened him to it firmly. Will turned to Miss Kenton.

"I've got to leave you here," he said. "There seems no other place—no place I've time to look for. Will you be afraid to watch them and see that they don't escape."

"No!" she cried with that sudden, curious courage that Will had wondered at before. "Give me that pistol you took. I'll shoot without pity if either tries to esacpe."

Tallboys uttered a derisive laugh. But Will, after a hesitating glance at the girl, knew that she meant what she said. He handed her Tallboy's pistol, after quickly and deftly extracting the cartridges under pretense of examining it.

The threat of an unloaded pistol would prove sufficient, and he wasn't going to trust Miss Kenton with a loaded one. He wanted Tallboys alive!

QUICKLY Will and Magnus withdrew, shooting home the heavy bolts on the outer side of the door.

"Quick, Magnus! We must get back to that corner of the tower, projecting just outside the door, and shoot quick and fast as they come hurrying up. They won't know why Tallboys rang for them, and if, as I suspect, Schmidt and Ohashi are the only leaders, once we've picked them off the breeds and Eskimos will probably take to their heels and leave us in control."

But they had hardly reached the passage when they heard the sound of men running toward the external door of the tower, which was flung violently open.

Instantly the passage was packed with a jostling mob of breeds and Eskimos, with the hairy faces of a few Ainos appearing behind. Will saw Ohashi, with his bound jaw, struggling in the press. But in the lead was Schmidt.

The giant bellowed when he saw Will, and, drawing a knife from his girdle, leaped at him. Will's revolver cracked twice.

"That's for you, Schmidt!" Will shouted. "I warned you not to come back!"

Again he pressed the trigger, with the weapon forced right up against the giant's body. But he could not reach Schmidt's arm, and all the while he wondered why the knife did not fall.

Then he saw that Magnus had gripped the giant's arm and was wrestling with him.

The three, struggling together, completely filled the passage, so that none of the mob could pass. Schmidt seemed unaware of Magnus; he was glaring at Will with insane fury. He rolled his bloodshot eyes, and a babble of unintelligible sounds broke from his lips.

Then, like a tree, his great bulk toppled forward, and collapsed prone in the passage.

Before the ensuing quick discharge of Will's and Magnus's weapons the mob broke and fled, carrying Ohashi with them. In another moment only the body of the dead Russian was in the passage. Will ran to the heavy door, slammed and bolted it. Nothing but artillery or a battering-ram could break it down.

He stood still for a moment, panting, and looked at Magnus. "They've got us now," he muttered. "If we could have got Ohashi. . . ."

He started toward the door again, then suddenly darted back into the large room.

THE stone walls offered complete security, the small window was inaccessibly high above the ground. But they were trapped in the tower. Will was not thinking of that, however. Into his mind had flashed the recollection that in one corner of the room he had seen something which had at the time escaped his consciousness—Tallboys' radio outfit.

He hurried to the corner. There it was, a small, compact transmitting and receiving apparatus.

Will had suddenly thought that there was just one chance for them. If the

Shrimp were anywhere along the coast it might be possible to apprize her.

He tuned in on her wave-length, but his calls elicted no answer.

Nevertheless he tried desperately, repeating his name over and over, and that of Miss Kenton, and saying that they were imprisoned in the Tallboys base.

At last he desisted. He knew the uselessness of it. Even if the *Shrimp* picked him up how could she make the entrance?

But the *Shrimp* hadn't even picked him up. Will turned away from the apparatus and looked at Magnus. The Finn had collapsed into his chair. To his horror Will saw that he was bleeding from a deep stab in the chest.

As Will went up to him Magnus toppled sidewise into his arms.

Will laid him on the floor. Magnus's eyes were closing.

"Magnus! Magnus, old man!" cried Will.

Magnus opened his eyes again. "I guess it's true vat I said," he whispered. "I gif my life for the deer. But we got Schmidt, and—ve got the deer. . . ."

His voice died away. His head fell back, and a shudder passed through his body. Will stared in utter incredulity at the dead body of the herder.

Suddenly the light went out.

Then he bethought him of Tallboys. There lay the only hope of safety. Tallboys should conduct him and Miss Kenton out of the pass. Let the deer go to the devil.

He flung open the door. "Miss Kenton!" he called in the darkness.

No answer came, and a dreadful fear came over Will. He stopped, listening. No sound of breathing, not that undefinable but unmistakable sense of living beings near him.

And, careless of the possibility of a shot or a knife thrust, Will went groping around with outstretched arms.

The room was empty!

He stopped to consider this. Then he wondered why no sound had come from without. What was Ohashi planning? How had Tallboys and the breed escaped with Miss Kenton? The two questions mixed themselves in his mind, he grew confused. . . .

Suddenly a faint, hardly perceptible odor that reached his nostrils explained what was happening. The interior of the tower was being filled with some sort of gas.

Half-conscious, Will staggered back into the outer room. As he did so he heard a crash which seemed to shake the heavens. Another followed, but in his confused condition of mind he did not know if it was from without or inside his head.

He groped his way into the passage, tried to call out, and then his legs gave way beneath him.

THE sound of water, the sense of movement was the next thing of which Will became conscious. He opened his eyes, to find himself lying in a bunk aboard the *Shrimp,* and Hughes standing beside him.

"Take it easy, Hammond. You're coming along fine. Another two minutes of that gas, though—that damned Ohashi was at the pump in the basement. It took eight bullets to send him where he belonged.

"We were right off-shore in a motorboat when we got your call on our portable wireless. Signalled the *Shrimp,* and she sent some shells over. Found you inside the tower, at the last gasp.

"Hammond, this is the biggest cleanup in a score of years. Tallboys had a regular packing-plant, all ready to start work. We've got all his records, and I've left an interpreter to get the Eskimos together and herd the deer back to the range."

"Miss Kenton?" asked Will anxiously.

"Miss Kenton? Why—hang it, Hammond, she was last seen with Tallboys, hurrying by motorboat to that mystery ship. No doubt they're safe aboard her now. That woman was hand in glove with Tallboys all the time. By the way, learn anything about those ape-men?"

"I did, but—excuse me, have you succeeded in interpreting that dialect?"

"Not yet, but Professor Rabinowitz, of the Smithsonian, think's it's a variety of Formosan, and—"

"It's Aino, Hughes, the original ape-man language, and you've loosed a nice little new colony on the Alaskan coast."

ME AND MY POKE

By ROBERT R. RICHARDS

Old Fool Oppel never reckoned on murderin' a man in cold blood before. But he hadn't ever been on a lonely Yukon trail with fifty thousand in his poke either.

IT WAS warm for an Arctic winter. Only ten degrees below. The air was dry as powder and the sky a soft grey film. Fred Oppel had waited nearly a month for just such a day. His cabin was pitched on a ridge overlooking the clustered sourdough village of Tallikot which hugged the frozen banks of the Alatna River. Three trails branched from the settlement; one poured southward to the Yukon, another north-west to the glacier-slashed valleys of the Koyukuk, a third dead west along the Alatna to Lady Luck, Nome and Outside.

Oppel viewed all three of them from the vantage point of his small cabin hidden behind thick walls of spruce. As he packed his Eskimo sled he thought with satisfaction that soon he would be heading for Outside. The hated village of Tallikot would be a memory and as he shipped from Nome he would laugh louder than any sourdough who ever grubbed for gold on the Alatna.

He was packing fifty thousand dollars in gold nuggets between the mattress of beaver fur on his sled. He'd exchange it for cash at Porcupine Basin eighty-seven miles down the Yukon. Oppel never had his gold assayed by Bob Thrush in the Tallikot supply post. There wasn't a sourdough in Tallikot who thought he was worth an Indian copper. To further this belief he had staked a worthless claim a few miles up the Alatna. For a dozen years he'd gone out regularly with pick, shovel and pan only to come back empty handed. He was known as that Old Fool Oppel, and the more they poked fun at him the better he liked it.

His tiny pinpoint eyes scanned the orderly little cabin. Beneath a plank there lay buried another five thousand in greenbacks stored in a tinbox. It was the only amount he had dared to cash. Now that he was pulling up stakes he could turn in fifty thousand and leave for the Outside before anyone got ideas about doing him in.

As he packed his sled gingerly he gloated at the success he had in secreting the worth of his goods. Not even his sister Amanda back in the States had an inkling of it. Although he was tempted to shock her with the news and picture her going green with envy. Sweet revenge on an old maid sister who had refused to stake him when he pushed into the Yukon a dozen years back.

Yup, the crochety old gal would throw a fit when he showed up in the States with a pearl buttoned suit and a bankroll that would choke a bear. He held a cracked inch of mirror before his weather beaten face and examined the grey scrub of whiskers. His lips folded back tightly over his mouth and revealed a row of decaying dice-shaped teeth. Soon as I hit Seattle I'll have these molars yanked.

He slipped into a pair of battered snowshoes and realized he needed new ones. But he'd gotten along on these so far and there wasn't any point in adding extra expenses when he was pulling out. Fred Oppel took one last satisfied look at his cabin and headed down trail for Tallikot where he knew he'd be the object of curious stares. His thread-bare mackinaw, tattered gloves and stoveless, hand drawn sled was poor protection against mid-winter weather. It was a mystery to the villagers how he went on year after year without catching a death of cold.

On his way to the trading post Oppel contemplated meeting the knot of sourdoughs who tied themselves around Thrush's warm stove. He'd greet them with curt hellos and collect his mail.

As he opened the door a blast of stove

heat greeted him along with the pungent odor of burning tobacco coming from a dozen sourdoughs absorbed in checkers.

Bob Thrush blinked at him through thick-lensed glasses and slipped a letter over the counter. Oppel recognized the cramped scrawl of his sister Amanda. He shoved it quickly in his pocket and was

aware of the amused grins of the sourdoughs.

"Most folks read their mail immediately." Thrush smiled.

"I ain't most folks." Oppel replied.

The sourdoughs shifted their eyes from checkers to the fat storekeeper and Fred Oppel. "I'll say so." Thrush was undaunted as he glanced at the battered snowshoes," It ain't everyone who'd risk a trip on those clodhoppers." The storekeeper indicated a rack of new shoes.

"I ain't interested." Oppel cut him off sharply as he turned towards the rack. "They're long wearers. Cut your time in half on the trail," Thrush said.

"I still ain't interested. Don't care if they got wings on 'em." The old man was adamant. He heard the laughter of the sourdoughs and his eyes fired with anger. "Don't expect to rot in this crumb hole like the rest of ya."

He shot a gnarled finger at them, "Why there ain't a mother's son of ya what's gonna reach outside with a thimble full of gold in your poke." Oppel sputtered and his lips twisted "Drinkin' squareface gin, gamblin and dancin' with them floosie hookers from Nome. They're ain't a man among ya with the brains of a dead timber wolf!"

The door slammed in their astonished faces and they heard Oppel grab the tow-rope and pull his sled away from the post with a stream of curses crackling the cold air. The men turned to each other and bent double with roars of laughter. "Oppel came dang near bustin' a gut," Slim Johnson said. "Thought he was gonna pull a gun on us," someone added. Bob Thrush wiped the moisture from his thick glasses, "Damned if he ain't the queerest cuss in a territory that's loaded with 'em."

Slim Johnson leaped to his long legs, "Twelve years and he ain't found a speck of yellow dirt. Must be he's waitin' for a gold lode to drop from the sky!" Thick clouds of smoke were scattered by rawhide laughter as the sourdoughs stampeded to the porch to shout derisively at the lonely figure of Oppel crossing the Alatna on a January day wearing an outfit that invited pneumonia.

"You gotta hand it to him," Bob Thrush said, "the way he covers trails without a mishap. If old man Oppel weren't so queer inside I think he'd be a right smart feller."

FRED OPPEL picked his away across the river and watched for overflows. He heard every word the men shouted in the Arctic stillness. The trail forked, west to Lady Luck, south to the Yukon. He jerked the sled behind a clump of pine and read the letter.

"Hullo, Oppel," a voice broke in on him. It was Lem Hackett, trapper and postman. "Where you heading?" Lem asked. Fred nodded towards the Yukon. "Porcupine Basin."

Hackett's team of huskies strained in the tandem. He adjusted the leather mail pouch slung over his shoulders and said, "I just came down from the Koyukuk. I'm telling you, Oppel, she's fixing to blow us to kingdom come. Blizzard starting at Doonerak. The wind howling like a wounded grizzily."

"Bosh." Oppel turned his nose up. "She'll never get past Henshaw Mountain. Ole Henshaw has broken the back of more storms than you could shake a stick at."

Lem Hackett shrugged his shoulders and jerked the tandem. "Maybe so, but I'm darn glad I'm moving out to Lady Luck just in case."

The old man watched Hackett vanish into a pinpoint on the horizon. Another fool, he said, going back to his letter. He grinned and stomped his feet in the snow. Just what he figured. Amanda begging him to come back. He could shove off for Lady Luck and Outside right now if it weren't for his beaver pelts. He'd get a better price for them at Porcupine Basin.

The dryness of the day held. The trail was hard packed and he walked at a stiff pace. If it kept up like this he'd make Porcupine and back within a week. Dig up his cache and shove out of Tallikot in the dead of night with more than fifty thousand sewed in his clothes.

At noon he boiled tea and cut thick slabs of bacon fat. He reread the pleading words of the letter. Now that Amanda was without funds and needed him she had forgiven him for killing her pet dog years ago. He had dropped a can of poison in the dog's meal because he barked too much and Amanda made a big fuss over it and ordered him out of her house. That was women for you. Sentimental and crazy.

He spat on the ground at the thought of his old maid sister and took up the trail again. Downgrade he kneeled on the spruce wood platform with one leg and kicked at the trail for speed with his free foot that had the battered web of snowshoes removed. It was eighteen miles to the first stop. A deserted hut with a tiny stove. Sunset would come at two-thirty.

This would leave him another hour of half-light in which to travel before complete darkness set in. As he passed familiar spots on the trail he was satisfied with his time. The tarp covering on his old Eskimo sled, the lack of a stove, the beaver pelts and his tattered appearance pleased him. Nobody could get any big ideas about the worth of his goods. It was all there for the eye to observe. Not that he was likely to meet anyone. He carried a hunting knife for self-protection as well as use.

The grey sky was blotting into murky darkness. The feeble winter sun had disappeared. The willows appeared more frequently and the niggerheads bulked thickly on the sides of the trail. Islands of evergreens appeared and the stark nakedness of white birch stripped by winter. He was near the hut. Oppel glanced at the watch Amanda had given him. Half-past-three. Perfect. Eighteen miles done with no more damage than a pair of tired legs. He was leaving for Outside none too soon. When a sourdough's legs begin to give it's time to pack up and go home.

The mud-chinked hut was no wider than six feet and no longer than eight. It was the only one on fifty-eight miles of trail. Oppel used his tarp cover as a tent when he moved further down the Yukon. The hut with its tiny stove was a luxury. The old man rubbed his calloused hands together, blew on them for warmth, and entered. Flames were already licking the grate and the smell of dank heated wood was strong. A pack had been tossed in the corner.

Fred Oppel frowned. The stop-over hut had another occupant. First time that had ever happened to him. He didn't like it a bit. He eyed the pack suspiciously. Least he could do is go through the belongings and have the jump on the stranger, whoever he was. He shut the door and untied the pack. Beans, tobacco, canned milk, and a pair of scissors.

The door creaked open behind him and he turned to face the blunt muzzle of a gun. "That's mine, stranger," a voice threatened from the darkness.

Fred Oppel dropped the pack. He struck a match and it flamed orange in the dark face of a short, burly man with a spray of black whiskers. There was a marble hardness about the newcomer's eyes which bore an accusing and ugly expression. He instantly hated this intruder with the threatening voice. It didn't occur to Oppel that the other man might feel the same way about him.

"I was a mite curious about you, stranger," Fred explained. "It ain't often that you meet anyone this time of season." The stranger chewed over this. The gun was less menacing as it slanted downward. "Well, that don't give you a right to finger my pack," he said. Fred Oppel's face reddened with anger and his lips tightened. The other man was right but just the same he didn't go for his manner. It was as though the stranger read his thoughts. The gun came up again.

The door banged open and Oppel looked outside. No sled. That didn't look good. The willows were thick with gold muggers but he knew how to handle them. "Aiming to lay over night?" he asked the stranger.

"You're a mite too curious for a late comer."

"Reckon I got as much right to this hut as anyone," Fred said.

"I wouldn't be so certain of that," the stranger snapped.

"It's the law in these parts," Oppel replied.

"Ain't no law up here that sez I gotta like your face." The stranger took a step forward. No, Fred silently agreed, nor me yours. The stranger's marble eyes shifted. He slipped his gun back into the holster and both of them unpacked in tense silence.

Oppel pried open a can of beans with his hunting knife while the other watched. "Like to borrow your blade," he said.

"Nothing doin'." the old man cracked. This feller must think he was a chechako. The stalest trick in the book. Borrowing a man's only weapon. The stranger placed his can of beans near the stove. He rose slowly with angry eyes.

Fred blinked as the gun shot from the holster. The stranger's face was a mask of meaness. Oppel's palms were moist with fear. The other man stepped back pointing the muzzle at Oppel's forehead. The old man's small eyes followed the movement of the gun as though it were a live object.

There was a blinding blue-steel flash and an eardrum-breaking report as the stranger fired. Oppel sighed with relief, the other man's target was the can of beans. The man's voice rasped through the fog of Fred Oppel's hypnotic fear. "A hungry man has to use his gun," he said, smacking his lips. The stranger had enjoyed the effects of his ominous movements. "Did I scare you, pardner?" he grinned. "It don't look like a feller in your state can lose anything by dying."

Fred Oppel managed a false grin as the stranger plunked a can of beans on the stove. "Go on. Move. Get out and get some twigs," he commanded. Oppel grudgingly left to search for willow branches. He examined the tightly roped and packed tarp covering of his sled. Little did that fool in the hut suspect the value of his goods packed beneath layers of beaver pelts.

He came back with an armful of twigs and dumped them. The stranger chuckled as Oppel avoided him. "Don't worry, old man. I won't kill ya for a few rotten beaver pelts."

That was the way they always talked, Fred figured. Tried to disarm you, jolly you up before they did you in. This stranger was nothing but a cheap trail mugger. He'd take anything from red flannel underwear to your blood if he could sell or use it. Then he had a crazy look in his eyes. Like he enjoyed killing for fun. There were lots of guys like that. They played with you for awhile, even made friends, then zingo! Your brains were blown to soup.

Well, he didn't know Fred Oppel. No sir. This old man he thought he was pushing around was shrewder than a fox.

"WHAT are ya mutterin' about?" the stranger demanded, his marble eyes hard with suspicion.

"Nothin' at all." Fred said breaking the twigs and dousing them with coal oil after dropping them into the stove. The twigs burst into sudden flame that roared out in yellow tongues from the stove.

"Watch out or you'll set the hut on fire." The stranger stepped back with fear in his eyes.

Fred silently pushed his pack next to the hot stove. His mind was made up. Mugger or not this cabin was too small for them. The man's fear of fire gave him a few ideas. It was like with his sister and her dog. She was always afraid that someone would kill the mutt. So one night he crawled out of bed and poisoned it. The effect on Amanda was wonderful. For months she treated him with the respect she had denied him. For she had gotten another dog and was afraid he would kill that one too.

The stranger watched intently while he banked the fire. He was afraid that the flames would lick out again. He would panic easily. Oppel stretched near the stove and pretended sleep. The stranger chewed quietly and then followed with a pipe full of tobacco. He settled himself on the other side of the stove at the end of the cabin and stared at the fire. He dozed, caught himself and then when he was finally satisfied that the old man was really asleep, he turned towards the wall and closed his eyes.

Oppel listened to the heavy breathing. He heard restless shifting. He waited. I slip up and he'll kill me sure. Then he thought, maybe the stranger ain't gonna try and do me in. But why take a chance? Nobody 'cept a fool took a chance with valuable goods like he had packed in the sled.

Sure it was risky but when his life and fifty thousand were involved, it was worth it. There was even more than that at stake. Nobody ordered Fred Oppel around, Amanda, the stranger. Nobody laughed at Fred Oppel and got away with it. He was feeling jumpy but he always did when he thought about these things.

Oppel moved softly. He squinted in the darkness for the embers had died to almost nothing and cast a feeble reflection. He made out the outline of the man's crumpled body. He shivered from the raw cold and the thing he was about to do. Fred Oppel tied his pack and nudged it forward towards the cabin door.

He jerked his head around and his grey hair flung wildly over his eyes as he heard a sound. Just jumpy, that's what I am. The stranger broke the stillness with heavy snores.

He had never figured on murdering a man in cold blood before. But he hadn't ever been on the trail with fifty thousand in his poke either. He figured when a sourdough wanted to get Outside with his diggings he'd kill his own mother to make it. That's the way you got in the north after awhile. Yourself and your poke. Nothin' else mattered because there wasn't nothin' else.

Oppel crawled to within a foot of the sleeping stranger. The man was lying on his side, facing him. Fred Oppel studied the closed eyes. He heard the deep snores. He seemed to be asleep alright. He was close enough now to see the large pores of his skin and smell the stranger's breath. The man didn't stir. But his hand still clutched his gun.

Fred Oppel's hands trembled as he reached back for the can of coal oil. He poured drops of it over the stranger's blanket by sifting it through nervous fingers. He tip-toed back to the stove, and his heart raced madly as he almost tripped over his own feet. He lifted the stove lid, emptied the can of coal oil, scooped his pack from the floor and ran as the hut shook and burst into waves of angry flames.

The hut was a roaring inferno as the orange-yellow fire gushed towards the black night sky like a geyser. Oppel watched with fascination. His heart almost jerked to a stop when the stranger screamed like a trapped animal. The old man heard fists beating on the closed door. He stepped forward only to remember the stranger's leering face. There was nothing now but the sound of dry wood roasting and crackling.

Fred Oppel stood by for a longer time than he cared to remember. He was filled with a sudden sense of triumph and power. He had taken life and it felt good. There was no remorse. It could have been himself in that burning cabin. He had done what a man is supposed to do. Protect himself and his goods. If for a moment he thought the charred body that lay inside had not meant to harm or rob him, he dismissed the thought.

Oppel dragged his sled out to the trail and turned his back on the dying embers. Suddenly he thought of the Stranger's gun. When the fire got to it why didn't it go off? Unless it wasn't loaded. Maybe the bullet he fired at the can was the only one he had. That didn't sound like a man who was going to do him in. Fred Oppel grabbed the towrope and slung the nose of the sled around until it pointed towards Tallikot.

He had better get off the trail fast. The ruined shack might arouse suspicion. And there was a new deputy at Porcupine Basin who was out to impress officials in Nome. His watch read ten minutes past eight.

If he hurried he could reach Tallikot, dig up his cache, and be on the trail for Lady Luck before dawn. He'd buy a team of powerful huskies at Lady Luck and he'd reach Nome within ten days. He backtracked over the trail for five hours, following his runner marks of the previous afternoon. The trail was still hard. No snow had fallen. The air was crisp and dry. He made rapid time before stopping for grub. Everything was breaking just right for Fred Oppel.

A disconcerting wind broke through the trees just as he reached the twin forks. He swung eastward along the Alatna and side-stepped Tallikot by taking a back path to his cabin. From the ridge he could see dawn stealing over the mud chinked and tar paper roofs of Tallikot. He thought of the sourdoughs playing checkers and gabbing at Bob Thrush's supply post. The fools, they were too dumb to ever get out of this place. Yet there wasn't a man among them who didn't believe Tallikot was just a stop-over toward the Outside. He, Fred Oppel, would be the first to get out. Stingy old Oppel, the man everyone laughed at, would out-smart them all.

He stepped into his cabin, lighted a candle and took a last look at his belongings. Fred crawled beneath his bunk. He pushed the loose plank aside and his anxious fingers gripped the cold corners of the moldy tin box. He counted out fifty one hundred dollar bills, slit the lining of his mackinaw and sewed them within. Even Amanda's dour face would break into a smile when she had her eyes on this.

Oppel packed his sled with fresh supplies and looked longingly at a Yukon

stove. He hated to part with it but it was too heavy to drag along. It was forty miles to Lady Luck over open and unprotected terrain. His eyes were already aching from lack of sleep. He must travel light and move fast.

Once again he stole through a back path in the shadowed woods and kept to it until it merged with the Alatna trail to Lady Luck.

HE glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes past nine. He figured on making the forty miles to Lady Luck in sixteen hours. The dawn broke wide and grey in the cold sky. Flurries of snow came from the north-east. The disconcerting wind was back again, increasing in velocity, bending the willows and spraying the snow from heavily laden branches.

Oppel quickened his pace. The sled dragged weightily behind him. The tow-rope bore against his shoulder like a chain. The wind kept coming at him, it snapped and bit his face with cold. He pulled the shredded sheepskin laps of his headgear across his face. But this time he had a tent. If the wind worsened he'd take shelter until it died.

He moved on, three, maybe four miles. It must have taken him an hour to cover each. The strong wind swept snow drifts clean across the plain and blocked his path. The trail was covered in spots and he had to burrow through the drifts like a man wading out to sea again the tide. A spruce branch split over-head as the wind battered every object that rose from the vast, rolling plain of snow.

His head felt light and giddy from lack of sleep. It wasn't going to be easy. But he'd make it alright, everything pointed to that. Sure, his progress was slow but he kept moving steadily west to Lady Luck. He had a good supply of food, enough to keep him on the trail for three days. He coughed and found it difficult to breathe in the choking grip of the wind. His eyes teared from the rapidly increasing cold.

Fred Oppel kept glaring at the north-east. Just like the wind was human and he wanted to frighten it away with scowls. She was coming from the Koyukuk. This must be the blizzard Hackett was talking about. Howling like a wounded grizzly as she swept down from Doonerak.

Henshaw Mountain would break her back yet. It always did, it always would. He'd never get the full blast of it, he knew that. She might snow with all the fury the Eskimo's predicted when the world came to an end, but Henshaw would see that it didn't rise to a full sized gale.

Suddenly he laughed weirdly as the wind roared against the plain and willows swept before his eyes at a sixty mile clip. Imagine pinning his faith on a hunk of glacial rock a hundred miles away. He was tired, aching for sleep, hungry, cold and getting jumpy like he had been the moment before pouring coal oil on the stranger.

He wondered if they found the body. If wolves would eat the charred flesh of man. Then he grinned. If the wind was sweeping the Alatna it was sweeping the upper Yukon too. That meant the shack, the ashes and body were swept away and blanketed in snow drifts. Maybe the stranger was blown clear to Kuskowim on the Bering Sea. That was one sourdough who would reach Outside.

Mountainous drifts were flaked to nothing in the driving blizzard. The trail kept covering with snow before his tired eyes. The temperature dropped dizzily until the cold tore at his toes and fingers like icy teeth. A shower of hail pelted his body like stones. He pulled the tent from his sled and draped it around him like a shroud. The hail punched at him but he moved on. He had murdered a man and fooled a village for a dozen years. No wind storm was gonna do him in.

The sky darkened rapidly and visibility fell to zero. Several times he stopped to shovel his way through the trail. But there wasn't any trail. Everything was blanketed in a waist high sea of snow. He shivered beneath the flapping tent. He reached for his watch, one o'clock and already black as pitch. Impossible! His body was raw with cold until he cried out in pain.

It was time to build a fire. Get something hot into his stomach and move on.

He had been smart enough to take a sack of dry wood and enough coal oil to heat the northern lights. He unpacked the sled as the wind tore at his threadbare mackinaw. The tarp covering ripped from the beaver pelts and he raced after it kicking through the snow. It went like the willow branches, sixty miles an hour and

disappeared on the horizon. But he kept running after it until he fell exhausted in the snow.

He lay there for awhile dreaming of hot tea pouring down his throat. His body was growing numb and he pulled himself together. The sled. Oppel raced back for it as it lay beneath a mound of snow. The hail stopped. He knew it. Henshaw was working for him. Soon the blast of wind would lessen. He clawed the snow from the sled with frantic fingers. The sack of wood was soaking wet as were his gloves.

He grabbed the towrope with shivering fingers and moved on. Somewhere there would be a clump of jack-pine, or a sheltering island of spruce and evergreen. Many a fool gave up before he reached such a place. They were so dumb they let the weather get the best of them. A smart sourdough like himself could never get licked on the trail.

Fred Oppel dimly recalled the tales he had heard about lone mushers whose wits had brought them through a thousand frozen hells. There was Bob Thrush's nephew who tied himself to the trunk of a tree while a howling wind overturned cabins and left him untouched. There were a lot of things a man could do. The north would never rob him of his goods.

The sled was barely moving now. His battered snowshoes were caught in some kind of undergrowth. His weary, bloodshot eyes lighted up hopefully. As he kneeled to free his snowshoes he thought of roots. Where there were roots there must be trees. The speckled fog of the blizzard was so dense now that he couldn't see half a foot ahead of him. His canvas gloves with their worn fingertips fumbled for his shoes. He felt the broken webbing of one snowshoe and his face fell. It had gotten tangled with the other. He freed himself of the shoe and continued hobbling on the other while tugging the towrope.

The wind sailed through his cheap canvas gloves and he felt his hands going blue and hard with cold. The pain was fading from his fingers and numbness was setting in. He looked into the face of the storm and grinned. He strenghtened his grip on the towrope. If his fingers froze on the rope it meant that She wouldn't be able to get his goods away from him. Fred Oppel didn't know whom he meant by She.

MAYBE it was the wind, or Henshaw, or even Amanda who had always hated him. Or else She was the earth itself that now turned against him and flung a blizzard in his face to kill him and steal his goods. Whatever it was She wouldn't take his life and cheat him out of his poke. He'd see to that. He cried out and cursed the elements but the wind swallowed his words and choked them back into his throat again.

He turned his back for the thousandth time upon the wind and it bucked him against the sled. He fumbled in his pack for sourdough cake. He'd stop and eat and tell the blasted blizzard to be damned. There was no feel of the cake upon his trembling hand although he knew it was stale, hard with cold and heavy by now. His arm could barely move as he shoved the cake to his chapped, swollen lips, which cracked and streamed with blood the moment the hard cake touched them. He was going to fling the cake away but he arrested his movement. Patiently he returned the muffin to his pack. Because if he tossed it away it meant that he didn't expect to live and eat it later.

Suddenly the burden of the sled lifted. He felt the ground drop beneath him. He was on a decline. There was such a decline right before you reached Lady Luck. His face was too frozen to manage anything but a feeble grin. His heart hammered back to life again and he raced on. He tripped and landed in a snowdrift, the wet spray soaking his face, his gloves and shooting down his back.

But it didn't matter now. He was near Lady Luck. It seemed incredible that he should have made forty miles in a blinding snow storm. And yet it was possible, he, Fred Oppel, the old fool of Tallikot, had done it. The snow that had fallen beneath his threadbare collar made him shiver from head to foot. He was suddenly aware that he had lost the canvas tent he had flung around himself as a hood. He glanced back. The sled was still behind him, his goods, that's all that counted.

HIS fingers clutched the towrope within his wet gloves and curled stiffly like the claws of a dead eagle. He had seen such a bird, a fine specimen, with all the taloned strength vanished in a lifeless curl

of claw. As he tried to rub his cheap canvas gloves together for warmth he suddenly remembered the kind the stranger had worn. Big, warm mittens of moose fur. Why had he been such a fool and not removed the gloves?

The decline leveled and it was hard to pull the sled again. He tried to recall whether there were a series of declines which leveled off before reaching Lady Luck. Out of some dim, half-remembered experience of a past trip to Lady Luck he decided there was such an undulation of the trail before it dropped into the village.

The burden of the sled grew terribly, featherly light, as he hobbled through the snow on numbed legs. He could see the towrope was still in his fingers, not because he felt it, but because he saw it. The decline began again and he stumbled like a drunken man down the hatchway of a ship.

He collapsed in an embankment of snow and pulled himself wearily to his feet. The very act of moving was agony, a kind of sweet numb agony. His dazed eyes were covered with a film of ice. They sought the towrope in his hand and the rope was there without the sled! He had carried only the towrope down the decline. No wonder it was feather light.

The thought of climbing the decline now made him want to cry. Instead he managed a curse which barely broke from his cracked and bleeding lips. He turned about and there it was half a hundred yards before him, maybe less. The trading post at Lady Luck. He could come back for his sled.

It was essential that he first get warmth and help. He pushed through the last half hundred yards of blizzard towards the post. Maybe it would look suspicious, being so anxious to go back for his goods soon as he came in frozen off the trail. Instead he would sit down for awhile. Warm himself by the stove. Maybe even take a shot of squareface gin or brandy. Indulge in a pipe full of tobacco. Give the eye to some floosie hooker from Nome so he could appear like all the rest of them.

It was difficult lifting his numbed legs upon the porch steps. There were only three small snow covered steps but it took him fully a quarter of an hour to mount them with the aid of his frozen hands. The pine door was shut tight against the howling wind. His stiff fingers couldn't maneuver the knob so he braced his neck and hammered his forehead against the rough planked door until someone opened it from inside.

The heat of the stove was like a blast furnace in his face. He sensed it rather than felt it, except on the outer layer of his skin which no longer seemed a part of his body. He was dazedly aware of a knot of sourdoughs breaking from the warmth of the pot bellied stove and shoving a checker game aside to form a ring around him. Someone forced some whiskey through his stiff lips and sat him in a chair where he sat blue faced and rigid, staring into space trying to make out objects at once familiar and strange.

It was with a hollow shock that he recognized Bob Thrush blinking at him in astonishment from behind thick lenses.

He was also aware of Slim Johnson's long face gaping at him and towering above the heads of the curious sourdoughs. Fred Oppel tried to pull himself up from the chair realizing if he didn't get up someone else might get his goods. His frozen body was no more movable than rock, his cracked lips parted, he mumbled, then broke into weird laughter at his hopeless effort to arise.

The sourdoughs turned to look at each other and all of them echoed the thoughts of Bob Thrush . . . look at the queer cuss blown near to death and blue from the blizzard, sitting there mumbling and laughing about his sister, a sled, and Henshaw Mountain.

Slim Johnson stooped over the old man who had stopped laughing and mumbling now. His big hand went beneath the threadbare mackinaw and rested over the heart while his long face pressed against Fred Oppel's rigid mouth.

"What's he say? What's wrong with him?" the others asked. Slim Johnson withdrew his hand slowly as he stood erect again and faced Bob Thrush and the sourdoughs.

"There ain't nothin' wrong with the old man now," he said dryly. "He's dead."

"DEAL 'EM MY WAY"

By JIM HANYEN

The two elderly, bewhiskered men of the bush had been on the short end of things so long that they almost overlooked this one, golden opportunity that Prosperity was laying on their trail.

THROUGH the haze, the late afternoon sun sat like a sullen yellow ball on the western horizon. It laid a rippling path of color diagonally across Pelican Lake, and the rays held a tint of gold that brightened the pebbles on the beach. Once, two years before, this might have set men to panning feverishly in the gravel of the very lake shore where now stood two elderly, bewhiskered men of the bush who were unburdened by gold, or any of its token forms.

Jack MacRae and Gentry were just in from a winter on the trap lines. They stood among the beached and rotting canoes of the Red Lake prospectors, some of whom had found fortune in the gold fields and had abandoned their canoes here at Sioux Lookout, on the way back to civilization. Others, of course, had left their canoes for another reason: they were going back out, bewildered, defeated and uncaring. For now the rush was over, and with it the prospect for quick and staggering riches. It remained for the mining men of the south, with their science, to come in and remove the gold in an organized way.

Jack regarded the desolate scene with sadness. "Gold is the ruination o' a man," he said.

Gentry nodded. "Especially when he don't have none," he said practically, "as we ain't."

"Ye've hit the nail on the head," Jack agreed.

Customarily, the pair were broke and thirsty. And this day, their first back in town, was no exception. After paying Joe Webley, the outfitter, for the supplies he had furnished for their winter on the trap line, they learned with indignation that there was not nearly enough left to carry them through the summer.

"Thinkin' o' Webley, as ye no doubt are," Jack said at length, "what conclusion did ye draw from all his talk about not not bein' able to pay a decent price for our furs because o' the low value o' pelts and the high labor costs in New York?"

"I'm thinkin' that Webley's bearin' us a grudge," Gentry said darkly. "He seems to be broodin' over our deal of a couple of years ago—the one that cost him an outfit apiece for us, plus a few cases of liquor."

"All o' which he deserved," Jack said. "But in case he's forgotten the justice o' the matter, perhaps we should go back to town and discuss it with him."

"Now," Gentry affirmed.

The two old trappers turned and walked up through the poplar grove to Sioux Lookout's main street. Jack stopped and unbuttoned the neck of his khaki shirt.

"It's been a hot day for May," he said, "and I'm uncommonly thirsty. But in view o' our limited circumstances, let's swing wide past the gov'ment liquor store."

Gentry nodded reluctantly.

WEBLEY'S store was dim and cool. It smelled of smoked and salted meats, and of oiled leather and new canvas. It was a typical outfitter's establishment, geared to supply the needs of trappers, prospectors and small farmers. The only fixture that seemed out of place was the outfitter himself. Webley was short, balding and paunchy, and despite the fact that he had lived here in the Ontario bush town for nearly five years, he still retained the air and appearanec of a city man. Which he once had been, for Webley had arrived from New York barely in time to reap a profit from outfitting prospectors in the late gold rush.

"Hello, boys!" Webley greeted them heartily. "Glad to see you; in fact, I was just about to send out a call for you!"

"Ye already have our money," Jack reminded bitterly. "What else could ye want?"

"This is a different sort of deal entirely," Webley assured him hastily. He rubbed his fat hands together. "I want you to meet two men from the United States: Mr. Campbell and Mr. Smoot."

Jack and Gentry saw the other two men for the first time for they stood at the counter in the darkened end of the store.

"These gentlemen are geologists," Webley went on. "They're up here looking for gold, and they need a couple of guides to take them in the Red Lake country. I suggested you two."

Mr. Campbell and Mr. Smoot came over then and were introduced. Campbell was a spare, rangy man, gray at the temples and keen of eye. Smoot was smaller and younger, and abstract in his ways. He extended his hand absently.

"Prospectors, eh?" Jack asked.

"Sort of," Campbell said. There was a soft burr in his voice that Jack recognized and warmed to. "We represent a development company in New York who are interested in examining the Red Lake country."

"Nobody knows the lake country better than you and Gentry," Webley said, "so I figured you'd be glad to guide 'em back in there for a couple of months or so. At the regular wages, of course," he added.

Jack and Gentry regarded the outfitter for a moment, puzzled. They knew that a two-man party wouldn't normally require two guides.

"Ye mean the both o' us?"

Webley nodded. "They have big outfits," he explained. "It'd be too much of a job for one man to handle."

"Mr. Webley has sold us supplies for four men," Campbell said. "It'll load a couple of canoes, he tells me."

"No doubt it would," Jack murmured, looking at Webley. "Before we go on with the negotiations, I'd like a private word with ye, Webley."

Webley led the way through the store and into the back room. This part of the store which had once been as jammed with goods as the front had been with eager, scuffling prospectors, was now all but bare. Business had fallen off alarmingly.

"Let's go over this slow," Jack said when they were away from the others. "Did ye sell them a four-man outfit so they could hire two guides or did ye tell 'em to hire two guides, merely to eat up the extra supplies?"

"Shh!" Webley cautioned nervously. "Look, MacRae, it's as much for your good as for mine. I can't move much stuff these days, and I have to unload when the chance comes. So, they'll need two guides to carry it and that makes work for the both of you. If you're smart, you can keep them out there, on one pretext or another, till the stuff is used up. It'll add to your bill."

"I see," Jack nodded slowly. "But I

can't recognize ye in the light o' a benefactor to me and Gentry, out of all the guides that's available. It's not like ye one bit!"

Webley looked hurt. "I'm not one to hold a grudge, MacRae," he said. "You bested me once," he shrugged, "but that's forgotten about. Will you take the job?"

Jack thought it over. He needed the money badly enough, and guide's work didn't come every day. Besides, it likely wouldn't be a difficult job, with Gentry to share the burdens. Last, and most important, he recalled the inflection in Campbell's voice. That was Scotch, and what would a good Scotsman be doing up here without proper liquid equipment?

"I'll take the job."

"Good!" Webley rubbed his hands. "I'll tell 'em you've hired on."

"It's a small point," MacRae said, "but I could tell 'em that myself."

"You'll be working for me, actually," Webley said genially. "I'm furnishing guides with the outfit."

They walked over to the door leading back into the store. "By the way," Jack asked, "what's in the outfit ye sold 'em?"

"Oh, four hundred pounds of flour," Webley said casually, "two hundred pounds of sugar; a hundred and fifty pounds of bacon—"

Jack grasped Webley's arm and drew him back. "That, so far, is the exact proportions o' a two months outfit for eight men," he said, aghast. "Webley, ye've picked the wrong two lads if ye think we're goin' to horse that stuff to and from Red Lake, merely so ye can show a profit on yer books!"

"There's less than a ton, all told," Webley said deprecatingly. "And there's four of you to handle it. Why, you and Gentry take that much into the bush every fall, think nothing of it! Don't you need the money?"

"I'll discuss the matter with Gentry," Jack muttered.

When they returned to the front of the store, Smoot and Gentry were talking earnestly, or rather Smoot was talking and Gentry was listening with some awe. Campbell stood by the door looking into the street.

"Mr. Smoot has been tellin' me about the preCambridge rocks that holds all the gold we have up here," Gentry announced. "It's a veritable Midas treasure box!"

"PreCambrian," Smoot corrected.

"Interestin'," Jack murmured. "Now, about this guidin' trip—"

Campbell came over then. "Before we talk business," he interrupted, "let's observe a fine old custom and toast the success of our trip." He drew a flask from his pocket and uncorked it. In the conglomerate odors of the place, a new one manifested itself. It was dry and heady, smokey and rich, and there could be no gainsaying the origin of the liquor in the bottle.

"Kirkland's 'Pride o' the Heather'!" Jack inhaled deep. "It's been too long since I last met with it, but not so long that I've forgotten."

Campbell grinned and passed the flask over. "Drink deep," he said. "There's a case of it left!"

Jack tipped the flask long. When he finally paused to wipe his lips, it was much lighter, and there was a sparkle in his mouth and a deep warmth in his body that coursed from his toes to the back of his eyes. He passed the flask to Smoot.

Smoot shook his head. "Whiskey slows my reactions," he explained. Jack regarded him with some amazement. But, he reflected, if the deliberate Smoot were slowed down much more, he would be in reverse. Perhaps the caution was advisable.

"Now," Jack said, when the flask had made the rounds, "gettin' back to the trip: Gentry and me will be glad to guide ye."

Campbell grinned. "I thought you would."

IN the early morning light of the next day the four men loaded the two canoes and prepared to shove off. They split the outfit between the two craft, and Jack and Campbell rode in one and Gentry and Smooth in the other. By sunup they were paddling down Pelican Lake.

Before mid-morning they arrived at Pelican Falls, the first portage, and here Campbell proved to be a real help. He carried his share of the heavy sacks, and more, and. he stopped, perspiring, only when the last of the outfit had been moved.

"I'm just as glad Webley didn't see fit to hire us four guides, and outfits for

each for the whole summer!" he said as they paused to rest. "Tell me, Jack, do you have a great fondness for flour and bacon?"

Jack knew then that Campbell had not been fooled by Webley's ambitious salesmanship. "I have no great likin' for the stuff," he admitted, "but as ye've no doubt suspected, Webley is fond o' sellin' it in great lots."

Campbell nodded. "So I see. I don't mind so much about the bill, for the company foots that, but I do object to hauling a ton of stuff over every portage when there's no need for it. You don't pull down a percentage on his sales, do you?" He looked at Jack narrowly.

"O' course not!"

Campbell seemed relieved. "I didn't really think it of you, but I did wonder what you two were doing there in the back of the store yesterday. Just a friendly chat, eh?"

"There's a minimum o' friendliness between the two o' us," Jack assured him. "No, he was merely tryin' to hire us to work for ye. He did mention that we might want to stay out here till the supplies are used up," he added frankly, for Campbell inspired honesty. "That would take at least four months."

"And it would run up a bigger guide bill than I would want to turn in," Campbell said decisively. "At $12 a day that would be nearly $1500."

Jack stared. "Ye said $12 per day?"

"Yes. Six dollars apiece for you and Gentry. That's higher than I'd figured, but Webley said the rates of labor have gone up."

Gentry looked at Jack. "Is that what we're to get?"

"Hardly. Ye heard Webley say 'the usual rates'. That means but three dollars. Campbell, ye've been taken over by the opportunist. It'd serve ye right, for bein' so gullible, but now that ye've involved Gentry and me in it, we can't let it drop. Shall we return and face the rascal, before we've gone too far?"

"No. Time is more important to us than money, though I share your urge for justice." Campbell looked at his watch. "Ten o'clock. We'd better be moving along . . . but first we'll take time for a small nip." He produced the flask.

"Take it light," he warned. "That's all we have with us."

Jack looked at him in astonishment. "But ye said ye had a case—"

"I did," Campbell nodded ruefully, "but there was so much gear I followed Webley's advice and left the case behind, in his keeping."

Jack and Gentry groaned in unison. "Webley's a monster!" Jack said fiercely, "and he never learns the lessons we try to teach him!"

The trip into Red Lake was not a long one, as journeys go in the north. But time dragged, especially after the second day when the pocket flask went bone dry. Jack tasted the dryness in his throat, and his thirst could not be quenched by the crystal-clear waters of the streams. Campbell suffered too, and neither of the Scots found much comfort in the conversations of their companions. Gentry had developed an amazing interest in geology, and Smoot's long and tiresome discourses, which Gentry lapped up, were as dry as the bottom of the empty flask.

At noon on the twelfth day they paused for tea on the upper shore of Red Lake, beyond the scene of bustling miners and prospectors. As Gentry was washing up the cups, Smoot was orating as usual.

"For the gold," he was saying, "we must look to those areas in the preCambrian shield underlain by Keewatin lavas and Timiskaming sediments cut by Algoman intrusives. The mountain building forces of Algoman time—"

Jack groaned. "Mr. Smoot, would ye be kind enough to conduct yer classes somewhere except at the dinner table—preferably in the dead o' night, about a half-mile off?"

"It wouldn't do you no harm to listen," Gentry said coldly. "You're always runnin' at the mouth, with nothin' to say, and Mr. Smoot here is educated. Even you could profit by what he says."

They glared at each other fiercely for a moment. Jack snorted and looked away. "It's not worth arguin' over," he said, "but I doubt if the sum o' yer accumulated knowledges can produce what we need most: a drink."

Campbell laughed, and Smoot smiled absently, his mind already on some other phase of geology. He was too preoccupied

to take offense.

"Maybe we just need a rest," Campbell suggested. "You boys can stick around here for the afternoon, if you like, and Smoot and I will prospect for a bit.'

"If you doin't mind," Gentry said, "I'd prefer to go with you—instead of sittin' here on my tail." He looked at Jack pointedly.

"Sure, come along," Campbell said. "You too, Jack, if you like."

"If you don't mind," Gentry said, "I'd spend the afternoon here, drawin' from my own store o' knowledge. Ye'll recall that we have a matter to settle with Webley, once we return, and I must give some thought to it."

Campbell grinned.

WHEN they were gone, Jack lighted his pipe and sat in contemplation. He approached his problems in order. First in importance was the case of Kirkwood's, which now reposed in Webley's cellar unless the outfitter had already figured out a way of disposing of it to his own advantage. Perhaps he had cut the seals and diluted the precious stuff with his own brand of lightning. Jack frowned. The liquor certainly wasn't safe with such a man.

Then there was the matter of the guides, pay, and aside from the fact that he and Gentry were being exploited—a hateful thought—they could well use the extra money themselves to make up for the short-changing on the sale of furs.

"He stands to reap close to $700, without turnin' a hand!" Jack muttered. It was not his first experience with wage-gouging, but it was one of his bitterest. He sat long, brooding, but no solution presented itself. Presently he nodded drowsily. He lay back and immediately fell asleep. He dreamed, and in his dreams he saw Webley in a canoe rushing pell-mell to destruction down a roaring rapids. He smiled in his sleep.

He was awakened in the late afternoon by the sound of voices. He sat up sleepily and saw that the others had returned. Gentry was rebuilding the campfire, and Smoot and Campbell were studying some samples under the powerful hand lenses they carried.

"Have ye made a strike?" Jack called.

Campbell shrugged. "I doubt it." He tossed over a chunk of quartz. "Gentry uncovered a short vein, which looks fair, but I doubt if it will amount to anything."

"Ye'll not bother to stake it out?"

"No, but Gentry can if he wants to."

"I'll do it in the mornin'," Gentry said. "Can you make a guess at what these samples show, Mr. Campbell?"

"No. You'll have to have them assayed. If you like, you can take them into Red Lake tomorrow. I imagine there's an assaying office there."

"There's also one in Lookout," Jack mused.

"Red Lake's closer," Gentry said shortly.

"But Lookout's more practical, in the light o' existin' circumstances," Jack said. "Gentry," he offered suddenly, "I'll volunteer to make the trip into Lookout for ye."

Gentry eyed him suspiciously. "You wouldn't, unless you was drunk—or else you're cookin' up some scheme that has to do with liquor."

"Yer association with Mr. Smoot's learnin' hasn't broadened yer mind any," Jack observed, "but in this case yer right. I also have in mind gettin' a rebate on some o' the guidin' money Webley is makin' off with."

A thought came to him then. "Can ye spare me, Campbell?" he asked.

"I guess so," Campbell said. "We're thinking of spending quite a bit of time right around here—maybe an extra month—and there won't be any job that Gentry can't take care of."

He paused for a moment. "I don't see why you're so eager to make a three-weeks round trip to Lookout, though," he added.

Jack held up the piece of quartz. "These rocks I hope will bring us a huge return. I plan to show 'em to Webley and see if I can recapture yer Scotch and at the same time equalize the wage situation a bit."

"While you are there," Smoot said, "you might wire our company that we'll be here an extra month."

"I'll be glad to," Jack said. "Now, if ye'll listen for a bit, I'll tell ye what I plan to do, and I'll be glad for yer suggestions."

Jack was prepared for the return trip to Lookout at sunup the next morn-

ing. His canoe sat high in the water, for he was travelling light, with only enough supplies for the eleven day trip. Campbell and Gentry stood on the lake shore and saw him off.

"Remember to come back," Campbell called. "Don't leave us up here with one canoe and all these supplies!"

"And bring back the assayer's report—and the liquor," Gentry ordered.

Jack nodded and set off down the lake with measured, steady paddle strokes.

The trip back was uneventful to a man who was accustomed to the bush. By day there was the heat, the black flies and the portages; by night, the swift chill that followed the setting sun. But there were people, and that made the trip go fast. The English River was a busy thoroughfare of commerce. Canoes of prospectors and mining men were in sight on the river nearly all the time. The wilderness, Jack noted with some sadness, was receding fast.

By noon on the first day of June, Jack was back in Lookout. He beached his canoe and headed straight for Webley's store.

The little outfitter was standing idly in the doorway as Jack approached. "MacRae!" he greeted, astonished. "You've been gone less than a month! What happened?"

"We didn't run out o' supplies," Jack assured him. "I come down on a couple o' errands for the gentlemen ye hired me to guide."

Webley looked curiously at him.

"Come on inside," Jack said. "I want to show ye somethin'—in private."

Inside, he reached into his pocket and produced a small leather bag. It thudded dully as he dropped it on the counter.

"Have a look, Webley," he invited. "Ye must o' seen a lot o' gold durin' the rush, though ye weren't back in the bush."

Webley untied the bag quickly. "As a matter of fact, I haven't seen much." He dumped the samples out on the counter. They gleamed dully in the dim light. Webley whistled softly. "Man! So they made a strike already! Have you had this assayed yet?"

"No. I have one other errand to do first. I'm to send a wire to the company in New York that hires Campbell and Smoot, tellin' them," he paused significantly, "not to look for their geologists before three months!"

"Jehosaphat!" Webley said, awed. "These geologists spend a couple of days up there and bang! they've made a strike! They have a lot of scientific know-how, eh? They don't just stumble around like the prospectors do!"

"They have the science, all right," Jack admitted.

Webley's eyes gleamed feverishly, and he did a small dance step in his excitement. "MacRae," he said, "why don't you run over and get this assayed, then come back and see me? I have a little proposition to discuss."

Jack nodded. "I'll be back this afternoon."

He went to the railroad station and sent the wire. From there he recrossed the street in the direction of the assayer's offce. He paused as he passed the government liquor store.

"No," he said finally, "I'll not foul my mouth with the stuff. I have but a few hours wait before I'll meet with Kirkwood's Pride again."

TWO hours later Jack was back at Webley's store. The outfitter, he saw with some astonishment, had changed his clothes. He was wearing a set of khakis instead of his business suit. And on his feet he wore heavy miner's shoes.

"Where d'ye aim to go, Webley?"

"Back up to Red Lake with you," Webley announced.

"Ye mean ye'd like to cash in on another man's strike?" Jack demanded sternly.

Webley nodded, unabashed. "I've already hired Joe Douglass to watch the store while I'm gone. I'm ready to start this very minute. Did you get the assayer's report?"

"I did," Jack said reluctantly, "and it confirmed what the geologists had suspected. But as far as yer returnin' with me goes, that's out. I'm now in the hire o' one party as a guide and I can't work for two. Besides, I'm not leavin' until the morning."

Webley pleaded. "Look, it's not a matter of guiding me. I just want to go back with you. Just lead me to where you left the

others and I'll work out the rest with Campbell and Smoot."

Jack considered this. "Ye merely want to accompany me," he mused. "As I said, I couldn't work for ye as a guide but maybe I could take ye along at that."

Webley beamed.

"For a fee," Jack added. "We'll set the figger at the new high o' six dollars the day, the pay to stop when we meet Campbell and the others."

"That's a hard bargain," Webley said reluctantly, "but I suppose prospecting is a gamble at best. I'll agree."

"Fine," Jack said. "Now, prepare a list o' supplies ye'll need for the three months ye may want to stay and don't forget to include Campbell's liquor."

"I'll take care of everything," Webley promised happily. "Can you be ready to start early in the morning?"

"I can."

If ever a journey began auspiciously, it was the return trip to Red Lake the next day. The morning sun slanted blandly through the mist-strung poplars that lined the lake; birds twittered cheerfully as they passed, and down the lake a pair of fishing loons whistled hoarse greetings. It was an inspired morning and Webley, paddling clumsily in the bow, was attuned to the wonders about him. He was overpoweringly cheerful. Jack, who sat in the stern with the case of liquor before his knees, smiled in grim anticipation from time to time.

The first hitch came at the portage around Pelican Falls. They beached the canoe and Webley stepped briskly ashore.

"You take the canoe over the portage, MacRae," he directed, "and I'll start carrying the rest of the stuff."

Jack ignored the order. Instead he lifted the case of liquor.

"I knew this would arise," he said placidly, "but I'll have ye recall our agreement. I'm merely to accompany ye; not guide ye, and as these supplies are for you, you'll be obliged to carry 'em over yerself."

"You mean you won't help me?" Webley demanded, amazed. "Why, I'll be half a day lugging them over!"

"Perhaps," Jack agreed, "but I think not. Recall yer words that Gentry and me often carry near a ton apiece, thinkin' nothin' o' it. Yer a younger man than either o' us!"

"I'm going back!" Webley raged. "This is another of your flim-flam tricks!"

Jack shrugged. "Suit yerself, but I'm goin' on and takin' my canoe with me. I've got to get that assayer's report to 'em right away."

Webley groaned. "I suppose I'll have to go along too." He had a sudden inspiration. "I'll give you a dollar a day extra to help at the portages," he proposed.

"No. Ye couldn't hire me for love nor money. I've canoed and portaged well over two hundred miles already, and I need the rest. Besides, it's too hot and it's fly-time."

He lifted the case of Scotch and walked to the other end of the portage. He sat in the shade of a small leafy poplar and proceeded to uncap a bottle of Kirkwood's Pride.

Webley made endless groaning trips back and forth over the portage. Each time he hove into view, sweating and staggering under a load of gear, Jack greeted him with greater cheer, and a wide swing of the bottle.

Webley was stripped to the waist. Sweat ran down the folds of his stomach and his back was raw from the packs he carried. Black flies swarmed around his steaming face and he swatted and cursed at them continually.

When at last he had the load reassembled, Jack rose, listing a bit, and walked stiffly down to the water's edge. "A noble job, Webley," he said happily. "Now, if ye'll assit—seest—help me into the canoe, we'll be off. There's but a few more portages to be made."

Webley was grimly silent, a state he maintained through most of the remainder of the trip. In the days that followed he worked as never before in his soft life. He perspired and lost weight, until his sweat-soaked khaki outfit hung as loosely on him as a scarecrow's suit. His face was burned raw from the sun, his hands were blistered and bleeding, and his features scarcely recognizable beneath a mask of fly bites.

They reached Red Lake after thirteen days of slow travel. Webley looked back questioningly when he saw the activity of the place.

"A few more hours journey," Jack said cheerfully.

At noon of the next day he directed Webley to pull into the shore. "We'll be meetin' 'em over there," he pointed.

They went ashore at the spot where Jack had left the others before his trip into Lookout. Jack made a small fire to boil tea as Webley unloaded the canoe. The outfitter seemed puzzled, and finally he broke his long silence.

"Where's the rest of 'em?" he demanded.

"They'll be along," Jack assured him. He stirred the fire. "I've been meanin' to speak about that," he said soberly, "but ye've been too uncommunicative. Ye recall that yer to pay me at the rate o' six dollars per day till we meet the others?"

"I remember," Webley said sourly.

"Weel," Jack said casually, "we have a bit o' a wait before us. Gentry's to guide 'em into the back country and I don't expect 'em back before mid-July."

Webley's jaw fell slack. "You mean we have a month to sit here?" he demanded. "I'll pay you no month's wages for doing nothing!"

"The alternative is that ye can walk back home," Jack said coldly. "Take yer choice."

Webley sat down on the ground suddenly. "You have no heart in you!" he moaned.

"Maybe not, but I have a fine sense o' justice. Ye sweated out a mere two weeks on the trail and it near killed ye. Gentry and me packed big outfits back into the bush last fall, and we like to froze all winter on the trapline—for what? When we sold ye our furs and paid ye off this spring, ye picked us clean!"

"I should have known better than to trust you," Webley mourned, unheeding. "Now you've got me proper. You might as well tell me the whole story—what did the assay show?"

"Gold," Jack said truthfully, "but not much, just as the scientists figgered. Gentry found the stuff, and he'll be sore disappointed." He shook his head.

Webley sat slumped and silent.

"What'll you charge to take me back?" he asked at last, humbly.

Jack sighed. "Webley, I wish ye'd learn yer own mind! I can't be runnin' back and forth between here'n Sioux Lookout all summer. Are ye sure ye'd stay, if I did take ye?"

Webley nodded emphatically.

"Weel," Jack mused, "I'll accompany ye back for the usual wage— the new high one." He thought for a moment. "There's a couple o' other points too: ye'll have to release Campbell and Smoot from that outrageous guidin' agreement and leave us free to negotiate between oursel's. Then there's the matter o' these supplies ye lugged in; no doubt yer not interested in takin' 'em back, so I'll accept 'em, as a small bonus. I'll cache 'em here with the whiskey and Gentry can haul 'em on up to Little Vermillion to our Number Four cabin when he arrives. How does that sound to ye?"

"What do you expect me to say?" Webley glared. "You know I can't do anything but accept!"

Jack nodded. "One more item: how do ye reckon the fur market will stand, come next spring?"

Webley looked out across the lake where little waves danced and sparkled under the midday sun. But the beauty was lost on him, for all he saw was day-long portages and swarms of biting black flies. He shuddered.

"The fur market will be normal," he said, "if you'll agree to start back right now!"

Queen of the Hangman's Kingdom

By DAN O'ROURKE

It was dead-man's choice for Stryker, blocked by the Barrens, hemmed by lawless guns. . . . Yet he might have smashed that trail-mask clan if the king-killer's wife hadn't held his heart.

ED STRYKER drew up before his spruce log trapping shack as the swift Labrador night was closing in. He unstrapped his oval-shaped rackets, pushed open the door and bolted it shut behind him. Little icicles hung at the corners of his wide mouth, and frozen ridges of rheum were under his eyes. For it was November, and the long cold had come to stay.

"Hello there, Keepee, old scout," he called to a tall Indian who stood by the sheet-iron stove, mixing fresh bannocks.

Keepee, which is Cree for "make haste," said, without looking up, " 'Lo."

Stryker, a whale of a man, shrugged out of his deerskin koolutik and hung it on a peg near the stove. They were not Labrador men, these two, their native habitat was many miles westward, beyond Hudson Bay, way over in the Saskatchewan River country. But furs run mighty fast along the Koksoak, and the Barren Lands produce no finer black foxes. Stryker, an Old Company "freeman," had seen wealth in the Labrador while still with the Company, and when he resigned he had persuaded Keepee, an old friend, to join him and try their luck there.

He was saying: "Say, Keepee, there's a blackie snooping around that deadfall yon made. Bet we'll nab him before the week's out. Three prime marten today and a beauty silver. Some running, eh?"

"Um."

Stryker bathed his face with snow while the Indian set out the supper. The cabin was small, barely clearing Stryker's head. It was thatched with earth and moss, which subsequently had been treated with water, so that a layer of ice covered it and checked the bitter winds that were always howling down from Ungava Bay.

Stryker was just about to sit down to a

steaming meal when the door whipped open and a fur-swathed man pitched to the floor, clawing at the boards. Keepee closed the door. Stryker bent down and turned the man over, and gave a little gasp when he saw the stranger was white. There are not many white men in the Labrador wilds.

"That brandy!" snapped Stryker, at the same time tearing open the man's furs.

Keepee brought a black bottle from the larder and put it to the man's lips. Stryked went outside and came back with an armful of snow, bathed the man's feet and hands and face. The nose was in critical condition, and he pressed it in his cold hand instead of using snow, for at a certain state of frost-bite snow will tear the skin.

The man began to mutter unintelligible things. He stirred; his hands writhed. His red-rimmed eyes opened, and in them was an appeal that beckoned Stryker to lean closer.

"Letter . . pocket . . . Kuglictuk . . . go . . . life depends . . . name o' God. . . ."

A rattle choked the words in his throat, His eyes glared for a moment, then became glazed and expressionless. A sigh fluttered from his blackened lips. Then he lay very still.

STRYKER rose, a little awed, then bowed his head for a brief moment. After which he bent down again and rummaged in the dead man's pockets. He found a little note-book, a sort of diary, bearing the name, "Harry P. Kavanagh." He scanned the entries made under various dates, from which he learned that a certain sloop had put out from Fort Churchill in hopes of making Whale River Post before the freeze-up. Things had gone wrong. The sloop had been wrecked by floe ice. The writer claimed to be the only survivor. He didn't know the country. He was without food.

"I guess that about tells the story," muttered Stryker grimly. "Now he said something about a letter and a life and for me to go some place. Let's see. Oh, yes! Kuglictuk, he said. That's a river."

After further searching he found an envelope bearing one word—"Jack." He paused before breaking the seal, then finally tore it open and read:

"Dear Jack:

Everything is all right. The beast disappeared into the Barrens almost a year ago, and no one has seen him since. I am counting the days till I see you. Harry was always a good boy, and he volunteered to go and find you, and both our hearts are broken while you are away. . . ."

There were two pages of maternal sentiment, written in fine script, and signed,

"Mother."

Stryker folded them after two perusals and sat down to think. There were two roads open to him. He could disregard the letter, continue with his traplines and bury the late Harry P. Kavanagh when the spring thaw came. On the other hand, he could take his dog-team, mush to Fort Chimo and then start east for the white, barren tundra that lies between there and the Kuglictuk River. If he chose the latter he would face death and starvation, and after it all was over he would return to the Saskatchewan with empty pockets.

A man named Jack was apparently in hiding. It is bad for a white man to stay in the Labrador alone. And Ed Stryker was of the brotherhood of the wilds. So he said to Keepee:

"Old scout, I'm pulling out tomorrow. Got a little job. You go right ahead with the trapping and make yourself rich. I may get back to nab a few more furs and I may not. When you got all the furs you want, leg it to Chimo and I'll meet you there when it's over. I'll have to take the team, but I'll leave most of the provisions with you and stock up at the Post. You can have my traps, too. I don't know what this letter's all about, but this chum who just died tried to tell me to carry on, and I'm obliging him."

Keepee, having finished his meal despite the newly dead, mumbled:

"Want me help? Me go dam' quick, betcha."

"No, Keepee. I know you're a good sort. But this is a whim of mine. I brought you over here and I want to see you get something out of it. Maybe I'll try next year, maybe, as I said, I'll get back in time to run the traps again. Anyhow, I'm going, for some chum's struck a streak of bad luck and I'm going to lend a hand."

Keepee understood his white companion, and he pressed the subject no further.

In the morning, when it was still dark, they drove the six wolf-dogs out of the lean-to in the rear and then brought out the twelve-foot *komatik,* a sturdy Eskimo sled which Stryker had purchased at Fort Chimo. Quickly it was loaded with grub, blankets and sealskin robes, and some blackies which Stryker intended to sell at the Post. Then they shook hands, the white man and the red, and their hearts were in their palms.

"Luck, Ed," murmured the Indian, then waved his hand skyward. "*Kisse-Manito* watch um."

"Thanks, Keepee. I'll see you later at Chimo."

"At Chimo. Good."

The thirty-five-foot walrus-hide whip snaked out and ended with a sharp report, and the big wolf-dogs lunged ahead, passed through a growth of stunted larch and tamarack and then struck the Koksoak River, heading north.

II

THEY found good going down the Koksoak. The dogs were in fine fettle, and Stryker reeled off fifty miles the first day. At dusk of the second, when a cold moon hung over the frozen world, Stryker trotted into Fort Chimo at the head of his outfit and went directly to the H. B. C. store.

Flemming, the acting factor, looked up from a copy of "Pilgrim's Progress" and said:

"Hello, Stryker. What brings you up here already? Thought you were holed up for the winter."

They shook.

"Strange things happen," laughed Stryker. "Chap blew into my shack and cashed in. Had a letter on him. Asked me to find somebody named Jack."

Briefly he related the whole affair, showed Flemming the letter and asked for a guide.

"A guide?" echoed the factor. "I wish I could, but every Indian and husky's off to the traps. Seems you've struck bad luck to begin with. Why not take a run over to Revillon's?"

"H'm. Might as well try. Thanks. See you again."

Monsieur De Loge, the agent at the Revillion Freres Post, was a genial man. He said after Stryker had given him details:

"Ah, m'sieu, I should lak to help you ver' much, but you will see by glancing about dat no one ees here. It ees a bad time, dis, to secure guides. De traps, you know. Meantime, howevaire, you will be my guest? De table is ready."

After a splendid meal Stryker went out to a clump of scrub spruce and fed his dogs. He had suspected all along that a guide would be unavailable, and now that the fact was thrust upon him he was a little undecided just what to do. He knew very little about the Ungava, and for a stranger to get stranded in the white peril of snow and ice and low temperature, is suicide.

He went back to the French post. A lone Eskimo had just arrived from the east, and on his komatik was a dog that had been unable to stand the toil of trail and trace. The Eskimo's dark face glistened with a layer of ice, and his sealskin netsek was caked with hoar frost.

De Loge greeted him.

"Ah, Chevik, a bad trail, *oui?*"

Chevik grunted and threw open his skins.

"Chevik, me frien'," proceeded De Loge. "M'sieu Stryker, here, desires a guide to de Kuglictuk. It ees a mission of great importance. M'sieu desires to find some one by de name of Jack, who is white."

Chevik's eyes narrowed. He shot a quick look at Stryker, then at De Loge. Then he stuffed his pipe and moved away toward the stove.

"Say, Chevik, what do you say about that?" called Stryker. "Good pay, Chevik."

Chevik, holding a match to his pipe, looked up and straight into Stryker's eyes. Stryker saw hatred in that gaze. The whole face, with its pulpy mouth, its slanting forehead and flat nose, emanated danger. With a faint sneer, Chevik continued to light his pipe, then drew his skins about him and went outside.

"Now what do you know about that!" exclaimed Stryker softly.

De Loge said:

"He would be a good guide, too. Speaks ver' good English, unlak de Eskimo. A great fighter, m'sieu, and marvelous wit' de knife. Hence his name, Chevik, which

means de knife. Ah—he dislaks you, howevaire."

"That's putting it mild," laughed Stryker. "He hates me. Why, I don't know."

Flemming managed to find sleeping quarters for him that night in a cabin that was also shared by one of the assistants. He was worn out from the day's hard traveling, and he turned in early. But he lay awake a long time, figuring things out, and before he finally closed his eyes he had decided that, guide or no guide, he would leave next day for the Kuglictuk.

He awoke some minutes later to find a dark, fur-swathed form standing in the doorway. For a long moment the stranger did not move, but Sryker felt that a pair of eyes were regarding him, despite the thick gloom. Cautiously he slipped his hand toward the stool beside his bed, where lay his belt and revolver.

Then the stranger moved. Instinctively Stryker dodged to one side. A knife whizzed across the room, grazed his cheek and stuck in the wall behind his head. With that he dived for his revolver, but the door slammed shut and the stranger was gone. Gun in hand, Stryker jumped to the door, hurled it open and swung his gun low for immediate action. But only a sharp wind and the cold night sky greeted him, and farther away the yellow square of light that marked the H. B. C. store. He thought of dressing and going over to tell Flemming and his assistant, but changed his mind.

In the morning he said nothing about the attack. He went over to see the agent at Revillon's and discovered that Chevik had departed more than two hours before. Stryker was almost positive that it was Chevik who had thrown the knife, and he felt that he would cross Chevik's trail before long.

WHEN he announced his intention of proceeding alone Flemming threw up his hands. De Loge, a bit of a humorist, wanted to know what kind of flowers should be put on the grave. But between them they mapped out a course and gave him hints on the country, for they were wise in the ways of the Labrador.

Daylight was almost complete when, his komatik loaded with a month's provisions, he pulled out of Fort Chimo. As he put the Koksoak farther and farther behind him the timber died away, until finally nothing but bare, ragged hills swept away toward the horizon and the frosty air hung like gauze all about him. It was the land of Torngak, the Death Spirit of the Eskimo; but Stryker was entering it unafraid.

That night he took some wood from his komatik, built a little fire, ate bannock, pork, and beans cooked in seal oil. He cut blocks of snow and raised a snow wall against the wind. He went to sleep huddled in his blankets and robes. Some time after midnight he was startled awake by a big form that was bending over him. With a sharp oath he tried to heave himself up; but a mittened hand smashed him between the eyes, and things spun around and then went black.

When he awoke he was sitting against his komatik. On the other side of the fire sat Chevik, the Knife, regarding him impassively, with a rifle resting across his knee.

"Don't move," grunted the Eskimo.

Stryker was cramming tobacco into his pipe.

"What's the idea of the big grudge you've got against me, Chevik? I'd like to be your friend."

Chevik sneered. "Me your en'my. Me kill you you don't go back Chimo."

"You will, eh? Well, let me tell you something, Chevik, I'm bound for the Kuglictuk. See? I'm turning back for no damned husky, either. The factor at Chimo knows I'm over this way, and De Loge saw that look you gave me. If I don't get back he'll tell the Mounties. and he'll tell 'em about you."

Chevik frowned darkly and nursed his pipe.

"Me kill," he muttered thickly.

Stryker got up. Chevik rose also, his gun still leveled, his eyes beady. They locked gazes. Then Stryker, shrugging his shoulders, bent down by the fire, looking for a fagot with which to light his pipe—or so it seemed. He pulled out a flaming stick of tamarack, held it to his pipe, then with a rapid movement flipped it up so that it struck Chevik across the forehead.

Snarling, the Eskimo hurtled backward. At the same time his gun boomed and the shot buzzed over Stryker's head. But

Stryker cleared the fire in a mighty leap and bore Chevik down upon the snow. The Eskimo lost his gun in the mix-up and met Stryker with his short, powerful arms. Still locked, they struggled to their feet, reeling, staggering about the fire, while the wolf-dogs looked on with eager eyes. For they understood.

In a break Chevik whipped out a short, broad knife, crouched, then dived at Stryker with animal-like ferocity. It was a downward thrust, and it carried all the Eskimo's weight behind it, so that when he missed he toppled over and buried the knife hilt-deep in the frozen snow. With a mad little laugh Stryker was upon him and lifted him up with such force that he ripped away the stout hide collar. His next blow caught Chevik on the Adam's apple and he jack-knifed to the snow and writhed, struggling for his breath.

When he tottered to his feet Stryker had a gun on him.

"Where's your outfit?" he snapped.

Chevik nodded toward the gloom sullenly.

"Lead me to it," said Stryker.

Chevik started off and half an hour later brought up before his campfire. Stryker bound him hand and foot, piled more wood on the fire, then said:

"It'll take you about five hours to work loose. The fire'll burn till then. After this don't go fooling around with strangers. Good night."

III

AT noon of the following day Stryker crossed the Whale River a hundred miles south of Whale River Post, one of the loneliest stations in all the Ungava. Chevik had not yet put in an appearance, although this did not cause Stryker to relax his vigilance, which he maintained night and day for the next two days. After passing the Whale and then the Mukalik, he headed northeast and at last came to the headwaters of the Kuglictuk. Flemming and De Loge had given him good instructions, and he knew that without the map they had supplied he would never have reached the river.

Desolation was all about him; stark, naked hills, fading into the cold film that always hangs over the Labrador, with here and there a wind-blown tree, and the frozen waterway winding silently to the distant Ungava Bay.

"It's a hell of a country for a man to live," he said aloud. "I wonder what the devil drove that there Jack fellow up this way."

He made a fire and put up his small Eskimo tupik, banking it with blocks of ice. Later a high wind worked across the tundra and snow began to drive down, pattering on the tent like buckshot. The dogs crouched down on the lee side of the shelter. The wind became a howling maelstrom, hurling the snow madly before it, so that in short time the fire was beaten out and Stryker huddled deep in his robes.

He drowsed despite the bedlam. He was sound asleep when a man cautiously pulled aside the flap of his tent and looked in, then, satisfied that Stryker was sleeping, bent down and cracked him over the head with the butt of his rifle.

Stryker jerked awake, still able to see.

"Chevik—damn you!" he burst out.

The Eskimo chuckled.

"Me come. Me kill. Not with knife. Not with gun. Me let Torngek kill. Take dogs, grub, gun. You starve, freeze."

"You dirty—"

His words were cut short by another blow on the head. He passed out completely. Chevik chuckled, then began to tear down the tupik. Then he piled it on the sled along with the robes, lined up the dogs and drove off into the white cloud of the blizzard.

When Stryker came to, his face was covered with snow. His shelter was gone. Only one 4-point blanket remained with him, and the awful cold was gnawing into his bones. He struggled to his feet, drawing the blanket about him, cursing deep in his throat. Everything was gone, even his ax, with which he might have built a snow wall. No food, no rifle, no robes—nothing.

"God!" he whispered.

He kept up a brisk pace to prevent his blood from freezing. He kept it up when the storm died and the dim dawn broke bleak and gray and cold, with all around him swells of virgin snow—and nothing more.

He figured he was about fifty miles from the mouth of the Kuglictuk. If he followed

it to the sea and then struck west he might by chance strike Whale River Post, which was almost another fifty miles away. But then his snowshoes were gone! How can a man trek through the Labrador without them?

He cursed the Labrador and every Eskimo in it. And he cursed himself for having penetrated it. He had a little tobacco and a dozen matches. He made a fire and had for breakfast one pipeful of tobacco.

Sinking knee-deep in the fresh snow, he began to follow the river northward. Perhaps that mysterious Jack was holed up somewhere along it. Perhaps he would meet a friendly Indian or Eskimo.

Three hours later, as he topped a barren ridge, he saw far ahead several wisps of smoke rising. His heart missed several beats and he gave a glad little cry. He summoned every bit of strength he possessed, until he rounded a bend in the river and saw on the west bank a settlement of three shacks and several tupiks. He summoned his last burst of strength, tottered up to the largest of the cabins, pushed open the door and rocked in.

SMOKE hung heavily in the low room. There was a sheet iron stove in the center, and sitting about this were three men. Two were French voyageurs, and the saucy clothes they wore suggested the country west of Hudson Bay. The third man was big and thick-chested, freshly shaven, with a hard jaw and a hard, cold eye.

"Hello," called Stryker. "I'm a stranger over this way. Had a team but some blasted husky banged me over the head and ran off with every thing I had."

The voyageurs looked at each other sharply. The big man spat deftly out of the side of his mouth and said:

"Don't say! This is no tourist country anyhow, stranger. What brings you up this way?"

"Do I look like a tourist?" shot back Stryker crisply.

"Well, I didn't mean it that way." He winked at one of his companions. Then: "Sit down. What's the news?"

At that moment the door opened and a young woman entered clad in sealskins. Stryker eyed her for a long minute, marveled at the beauty of her dark eyes.

The big man interrupted. "My name's Delevan. What did you say about that husky?"

"Oh, yes," said Stryker, and gave his own name.

The woman passed to the rear of the room. Stryker went on:

"Well, as I said, the fellow robbed me. Didn't like me since he saw me at Fort Chimo. I'm over here looking for someone whose front name is Jack.

The girl gave a little cry. Delevan fixed her with a threatening look. She turned away, trembling, and disappeared behind a curtain which separated part of the cabin.

"Yes, Jack's the name," continued Stryker. "I was running a trapline over on the Koksoak when a chap blew into my shack, gave me a letter, mentioned this river and then died. The name on the letter is Jack; that's all."

"Let's have it," said Delevan.

"I'm sorry, chum, but it's only for Jack."

Delevan glowered. "Oh, you don't say? All right, then. Well, there's no Jack around this camp, so you might as well move on. Who'd you say was the man died?"

"I didn't say, but it was a chap named Kavanagh."

"Kavanagh!" Delevan half rose from the chair, his eyes wide.

A choked sob issued from behind the curtain. Delevan snapped to his feet and went behind. Stryker could not hear what he said, but he noted the low, menacing tone of his voice. Then Delevan came out again, his face a little flushed.

"Stranger, there's a cabin next door you can share with Paul and Rex, here. Show him, Rex," he said to one of the Frenchmen.

A little perplexed at the way things were going, Stryker followed Rex to the little shack. It had but one room; and robes on the floor served for bunks.

"You expect to go on soon, m'sieu?" purred Rex, his dark eyes sparkling.

"As soon as I get a guide. I'd like to run up against that husky that swiped my outfit. Crack team that was. I'd break his greasy neck."

Rex chuckled liquidly.

"Good luck to you, m'sieu," he said, and sauntered out.

And Stryker did not fail to get the sinister note in his voice.

IV

REX and Paul came into the cabin later, and the latter made supper. Stryker, sitting beside the little stove, told himself that both of them bore the earmarks of the devil. Rex was always chuckling, and Paul, as though understanding its meaning, would wink back and then favor Stryker with a wide, ingratiating smile. And Stryker was charged with a desire to get up and knock the fellow for a row of stumps. He bided his time, however, for he felt that he was on a warm trail, that Delevan and his henchmen knew something about Jack, and that the girl would be prevented from telling what she knew.

He tried to stay awake that night. He lay on one side of the stove, while Rex and Paul lay on the other side, and he damned the luck that had left him without a gun. But try as he would, his eyes refused to stay open. He fell into sound slumber.

Later on he awoke with a start and tried to cry out, but found a dirty piece of hide across his mouth. Then a bag was pulled over his head and tied about his neck. Hoarse whispers floated to him. Rough hands picked him up; and then he felt the bitter cold against his body, and he knew he had been carried from the cabin.

Five minutes later his captors halted. More whispers . . . a brief, rasping argument . . . silence. He knew that something terrible was going to happen. He struggled frantically. And then he felt himself released. A moment later an icy shock went through his body and his blood seemed to congeal instantly.

He was in the cold waters of the Kuglictuk!

He struck out. His feet touched the river bottom, and he guessed the water was no more than eight feet deep. He sprang up in an attempt to grasp the edge of the hole through which he had been dropped. His head bumped against the ice. He tried again, and this time his frozen hands caught onto the rim of the hole, but his fast dying strength was not sufficient to haul his body clear. With a groan he started to sink again.

Then, magically, he felt himself being drawn up. His body was too numb to sense contact, but he knew that he was clear of the water, that someone was carrying him across the ice. Already his clothing was frozen stiff as a board.

He heard a door slam. He felt a new warmth. Then his clothes were being torn off. Brandy was thrown down his throat. Deft hands were massaging and slapping his purple flesh. He could see nothing. He was in a semi-stupor, and he could only hear; and by and by he began to feel.

Warm, soft Hudson Bay blankets were wrapped around him. He was lying on a pile of robes. His eyes opened, but he saw through a haze. The red stove looked like a big evil eye. Several short, squat figures hovered near him. Another shot of brandy was poured between his lips. Things cleared. He was in a cabin. A round, swarthy face was near his own.

"Better?" a voice inquired.

He squinted, and as his vision became perfect he gave a little start.

The man bending over him, administering to him, was Chevik, the Knife!

"You!" he choked.

The Eskimo raised a hand in warning. "No noise. You better soon."

An hour later Stryker sat up. His vitality was remarkable, and anyhow a bath in frozen water is not so bad as it often is supposed, provided expert attention is given immediately. He looked around for Chevik. The Eskimo was gone, but another squatted stolidly by the stove.

"Chevik?" asked Stryker.

The Eskimo made signs which Stryker too as indicating that Chevik had gone out and would return shortly. He found his pipe and found some tobacco on the table. Then he searched for the letter and the notebook which had been in an inner pocket. His clothes, hanging by the stove, were still wet, and both letter and book had been removed.

"Delevan's work!" he muttered bitterly.

The door whipped open. Chevik waddled in, regarded Stryker studiously for a moment, then went to the rear of the shack and came back with dry clothes.

"Put on," he said shortly. "And quickly."

"Say, did Delevan and his gang heave me in the river?" Stryker asked.

Chevik nodded.

Stryker proceeded:

"Tell me what it's all about, will you? First you try to kill me, then Delevan tries his luck, and then you come along and save me. Dammit, what makes me so blasted important anyhow? And where does the lady fit in?"

Chevik pointed to the fresh clothes.

"Put on—dam' quick." He went to the door and looked out, then closed it quietly.

"Damn quick!" he repeated.

While he dressed, Chevik went out. Ten minutes later he reentered, only to pause in the doorway, and jerk his thumb over his shoulder. Stryker followed him outside. His old dog-team was there, and he saw that his komatik had been replenished with provisions. Chevik handed him the walrus hide whip.

"Go north," he said. "Turn west mouth river, reach Whale River. Go!'

"What's the idea?"

"Go. Delevan kill."

"Who sent you?"

"White woman."

Stryker thought over this. "What is she here?"

"Delevan's wife."

Stryker spat sharply. "But that letter. Delevan stole a letter from me. I want it."

"Go!"

"Damned if I will! Who the hell does Delevan think he is? I'm going to get that letter. Where's my rifle?"

Chevik pointed to the komatik. Stryker snatched up the rifle. Chevik grasped his arm.

"White woman say go. Delevan kill."

Stryker tore the Eskimo's hand away.

"No, Chevik, old chum. I'm indebted to you for saving my life. But I'm looking for somebody, and I've got a hunch this is the end of the trail. I'm going over there to Delevan's cabin and talk turkey to that bum. Hands off, Chevik!"

V

CHEVIK'S cabin was only a quarter of a mile from the one in which Stryker first had met Delevan. When he left the Eskimo he trotted briskly along the hard surface of the snow, topped a rise and then swung down toward the river, where he could see the lighted cabins. He drew up before the large cabin and put his ear to the door. He heard a loud guffaw, then the unmistakable, fiendish chuckle of Rex. He held his rifle tightly, then banged open the door, entered and kicked it shut with his heel.

Delevan and his two henchmen were sitting at the table with a bottle of whiskey between them. Delevan was the first to look up. His face froze. Rex almost toppled over. Paul crushed the glass of whiskey which he was about to raise to his lips. The room was deathly still.

"Not a move!" snapped Stryker. Then: "You, Delevan out with that letter and book you swiped. Quick! Don't look at me like a damned fool! Show some life!" His voice rang with command.

Delevan, his mouth twitching, fumbled in his shirt pocket and brought out the letter and then the notebook. The two Frenchmen had overcome their momentary paralysis and were now eyeing Stryker craftily. Tension was high in the low room.

Stryker said: "Get up, the three of you. Put your guns on the table and line up against the wall."

Delevan, now sullen with rage, obeyed reluctantly. Rex and Paul followed their chief's example. As they backed against the wall Rex's hand rested lightly on his right hip.

"You, Rex, take that knife out of your sash," lashed out Stryker. "Something tells me you're not going to live long. Out with it!"

With a sneer the Frenchman pulled a knife from his sash and threw it upon the table. As Stryker stepped forward to gather up the letter and book, the curtains in the rear parted and the mystery woman stepped out. There was a big revolver in her hand.

"Back!" she warned Stryker coolly.

With a nasty laugh Delevan, thinking he had the better of the break, lunged toward the table for his knife.

"You too—back. All of you," said the woman.

Delevan snarled, "You brat!"

Stryker said, "What the devil!"

"Back!" warned Delevan's wife.

Perplexed, angry, yet marveling at the girl's cool nerve, Stryker held his peace. She picked up the letter and the book, then smiled across at Stryker.

"You better keep your gun on these fellows," she told him.

"But those—they're mine, madam."

Without another word she disappeared behind the curtains. A moment later she came out dressed for the trail. For a brief instant Stryker was undecided whether to detain her or keep his gun on the three others. But that brief instant, the split-second's relaxation, gave Rex time to dive for the table, snatch up his revolver and drop behind it. The next moment his gun blazed. Simultaneously Delevan and Paul jumped for their weapons. Stryker's gun boomed twice wildly. The girl was tugging at his arm.

"Come! Out!" she screamed.

"I'll not let these dirty—"

"Fool! Come!"

SHE half-dragged him through the door and began to run off toward Chevik's cabin, yelling for Stryker to follow her. He was taking her advice a little against his will, for he felt that he had more than one score to settle with Delevan and the two Frenchmen. And his blood was up. And he was ripe for anything short of murder.

"I wish you'd let me—" he started to say.

"Never mind. It's only started," panted the girl. "You'll get all the fight you want."

Delevan and his henchmen were already on the trail. Half a dozen huskies came tumbling out of the smaller shacks and took up the pursuit, and the frosty night was shattered with rifle fire and mad oaths.

Stryker and the girl reached the cabin and burst in. Chevik and the other Eskimo were sitting by the stove, half asleep. The door was bolted.

The girl said: "Chevik, Tukoluk, quick! Big fight!"

The Eskimos grunted, yawned and picked up their rifles. The girl took a handful of shells from her pocket and placed them on the table. Stryker loaded his rifle to capacity. The grimy oil lamp was extinguished, and the heavy table was braced against the door.

The pursuers arrived, and Delevan's voice boomed:

"Open that damned door! Open d'you hear?"

"Go 'way; you make me laugh," shot back Stryker.

"I do, eh? All right, you pup, you'll laugh the other way when I'm finished with you."

"That's cheap talk, Delevan. Let's see what you can do."

Delevan swore and fired, but the door was of stout spruce and merely absorbed the lead. Then the attackers hurled themselves against it *en masse*, and it shivered but gave no hint of breaking down.

"I want my wife!" bawled Delevan furiously.

"You don't say!" replied the girl. "Try and get me, then." She was cool as ice.

There was a lull. Then there were sounds on the low roof, the crunch of many feet, and after that came the ring of an ax. Stryker stood so close to the girl he could look into her eyes.

"They're going to chop through," he muttered.

"Yes," she said, and let her hand fall upon his arm.

He thrilled.

"But we'll win through," he grated out

"Yes—we will," she said.

The ax was still pounding away. The roof was straining and snapping. Then the ax stopped, and several men began to jump up and down. The roof strained more and more until finally the middle of it caved in and a deluge of snow and men crashed to the floor. Chevik caught Paul neatly across the back of the neck with a wielded gun and reduced their number by one. But more dropped through and guns and knives were swung with murderous ferocity.

Stryker, having killed one of the attacking Eskimos, swung open the door and led the fight out into the open with the girl beside him. Chevik, his face bleeding, rolled out after them, and close on his heels came Tuktoluk, shooting back as he ran. Delevan's gang, falling over one another, burst out in hot pursuit, their guns flaming, with Delevan himself, a gun in each hand and red murder in his eyes, at the fore.

Stryker reached the settlement of three cabins and drew the girl down with him beside the nearest. Chevik and Tuktoluk rocked up behind him and threw themselves to the snow. The attackers came up over the ridge, and as they swung toward the cabins Stryker bowled over one of them with two fast shots. Chevik wounded an-

other but did not put him completely out of the fight.

The attackers drew up and dropped to the snow, taking pot-shots at the cabins. The Northern Lights grew brighter, flinging their ghostly banners across the white tundra. The attackers, realizing they were too much in the open, retreated and worked away toward the river, but Tuktoluk dropped one of them and the girl's shot made another stagger until a companion helped him along.

VI

"ABOUT six left," observed Stryker. The girl started to say something; but at that moment a gun was poked in the air, and from it fluttered a piece of white cloth.

Stryker yelled, "Come on up, only one, and have your say!"

It was Rex who came forward over the little ridge that concealed the others, holding the flag of truce before him.

"Well?" snapped Stryker.

"M'sieu," began the man, "we have no desire to murder you. M'sieu Delevan says to let his wife go and call t'ings off. It ees bad policy, m'sieu, to steal another man's wife."

Stryker looked at the girl. "Did you hear that? I'm here to help you out. I'm not interfering; but Delevan tried to murder me, and it seems he's none too good to you. I'll fight this thing out as you say. If you go over to him or not, he's to settle with me for other things."

He paused. He was not a man to mince words. That is why he asked:

"Do you love him?"

She shuddered. "No. But I'd better—"

'That's all. You were going to say you'd better go over to save me." To Rex, "Tell Delevan to go to the devil."

The Frenchman did not move. He regarded Stryker with a strange twinkle in his eyes.

Then something happened. There was a rush from the rear. At the same time Rex swung his gun butt to hip. Stryker, sensing immediately that the others had crept around while Rex was offering a truce, swung his rifle in a short arc and broke the Frenchman's jaw.

He whirled around and found the girl in his arms. She whispered:

"There's one bullet in my gun. I'll keep it for myself."

Scarcely knowing what he did he kissed her, then pushed her behind him and fired his gun point blank at an Eskimo that was just about to brain him. The husky went down with a scream. Chevik and Tuktoluk were at close quarters with four others, and Delevan was lunging wolfishly toward Stryker.

Stryker, his rifle empty, advanced to meet him. They both swung at the same time. The rifles crashed in mid-career, broke, and the two men grappled. Delevan broke away and came back with a mighty fist that grazed Stryker's jaw and turned him completely around. Following up, Delevan caught him behind the ear with a short but terrific jab that sent him head first to the snow. But Stryker was a hard man and quick for his size. He was up and at Delevan, and everything he had was behind his blows.

It was furious, the way they mixed it, and before many minutes both were spitting blood, and their hide mittens were soggy with it.

Tuktoluk went down with a smashed skull even as Chevik broke one opponent's neck. The other three piled on him and, fighting to the last, he went down. As one of the huskies raised his knife to stab him, the girl, with a little cry, swung her revolver about and fired her last shot—the shot she was going to save for herself. The husky dropped across the groaning Chevik.

The other two rushed at the girl and overpowered her, then began to carry her off, each striving to tear her from the other. With a mad snarl one let her go, whipped up his knife and buried it in the other's back. Then, cackling, he picked her up and disappeared behind one of the cabins. A little later he mushed out behind a komatik and a four-dog team, and the girl was strapped to the komatik.

Stryker and Delevan, struggling to the death, did not see this. Now they were down on the snow, locked in each other's arms, kicking, biting, cursing, with one and then the other on top. They carried the fight over the little ridge and right down to the river. Then they were up again and out upon the frozen waterway, slugging,

taking and giving, streaming blood.

"Delevan," ground out Stryker, "this is the last fight you'll ever do. I'm going to pound you to death."

Delevan spat out a tooth. "D'you think so? G'on, you pup; the wolves'll get you before morning."

They closed and rocked farther out upon the river. They neared a hole cut in the ice which apparently had been used for fishing. Delevan had Stryker by the nose and was trying to twist it off, and with the intense pain the latter's knees buckled as he tried to tear away. Then they went down in a heap, with Stryker underneath. Frantically Delevan pulled a long, slim knife from inside his sealskin coat and raised it high above his head.

Chevik was tottering and reeling down toward the waterway. He saw Delevan draw his knife. Chevik, the cleverest Eskimo with a knife in all the Labrador, hesitated for a split second. Then he fingered his own knife gingerly, gauged the distance with a calculating eye and threw it. It sang eerily through the air, struck Delevan point first in the side of the neck. His throat rattled. He heaved to one side, lost his balance and plunged through the hole in the ice to the bitter waters of the Kuglictuk.

Panting, Stryker struggled up and lunged toward the shore. He fell upon Chevik, grasped his hand and pressed it till the Eskimo winced.

"Thanks, Chevik! God—thanks, old chum!" Then, "Where's the white woman?"

"Gone. I see go. Man take."

The two badly mutilated men stumbled to Chevik's cabin, lashed out the dogs and followed the trail made by the abductor.

VII

THE dawn broke gray and leaden above the winter-locked Labrador. Stryker was running up beside his lead-dog. Chevik was trotting behind the komatik and cracking the whip. Men and dogs were covered with hoar frost.

Rounding a bend in the river, Stryker raised his hand, and Chevik called the dogs to a halt. Up ahead, on the west bank, was the smoke of a campfire, and Stryker could make out two figures beside it.

"It's them," he said.

He rummaged in his equipage and found a revolver, then continued at breakneck speed. Immediately there was a stir in the camp. One of the figures bundled the other upon the komatik, swung out the dogs and began to drive madly northward.

But Stryker had a powerful team, and in short time he was within pistol shot of the kidnaper. He fired. Missed. The other without stopping, turned and returned fire. The shot went wild. Stryker stopped, took careful aim and shot again. This time the man stumbled, tried to grasp the gee-bar of his komatik, missed and sprawled headlong on the snow.

He was dead when Stryker drew up. A hundred feet farther on the team had stopped. He found the girl trying to struggle from her thongs. When she saw him she stopped struggling and lapsed into a coma.

Chevik made a fire. Strong tea revived the girl, and when she came to she found herself in Stryker's arms. And she did not seem to care.

"Thank God you came," she said with a shudder. "That beast of an Eskimo . . ."

"Yes, I understand," nodded Stryker. "I may as well tell you now that the whole gang is cleaned out, including your husband. He was about to stick a knife in me when Chevik, here, pitched his own knife and hit the bull's eye. Delevan is now at the bottom of the river. This husky back here was the last of the pack."

"Good Chevik," she murmured. Then: "And my husband dead? It might sound cruel, but I'm glad. And—and thanks for bringing that letter. Poor Harry, he had to die."

Stryker looked puzzled. "Letter? Harry?"

"Yes. You see, I am Jack. Funny name for a girl, isn't it?"

Stryker was stunned. "You—Jack?"

"Yes. Harry Kavanagh was my brother. It's hard to say why I ever married Pete Delevan. It happened two years ago. But I haven't lived with him for one day. He was a beast. My folks didn't believe in divorce, so what could I do? I told him to stay away from me, but he wouldn't. Delevan hounded me wherever I went.

"My father used to run a trading post in the Labrador, and when he gave it up

and came home he brought his servant, Chevik, with him. It was Chevik who helped me get away. He knew the Labrador well, and I asked him if he would bring me here and help me to hide. He did. He's faithful, Chevik is.

"He'd never seen Delevan, so when you asked him to guide you over this way he suspected you were the man. He told me of that meeting at Fort Chimo, how he had left you to starve and all that. Then when I told him that while he was at Chimo Delevan had tracked me with the aid of two villainous Frenchmen, he was very sorry. Delevan had whiskey, and with it he bribed most of the Eskimos; but Chevik and his brother, Tuktoluk, remained loyal, although they gave Delevan to believe otherwise.

"When you came in and told Delevan what you were after, he threatened to kill you if I revealed my identity. I figured he would try to kill you anyway, so I set Chevik to watch him. And Chevik saved you from drowning. I—I guess I've caused you an awful lot of trouble, Mr. Stryker."

"Mister? My front name's Ed."

"Well, Ed, then."

And she smiled up into his bruised face.

"No trouble at all, Jack," he lied nobly. "Just a little excitement."

ICE KEN

In the Arctic, the landfast ice is frozen to the beach, and extends out to sea. Some of it is usually aground, having been "raftered" and piled into ridges by the pressure of the off-shore pack, sailing before an on-shore wind.

The pack ice, of considerable thickness and extent, drifts about off-shore.

An ice field is a large, practically unbroken section of the drifting pack.

An ice floe is much smaller than a field; it may be anywhere between an acre in extent and a quarter of a mile wide.

An ice cake is much smaller than a floe; it may be as small as a piano or as large as a bungalow.

Paleocrystic ice is many years old; some fields may date from the previous century. In the beginning, the pressure ridges and up-ended floes were sharp and angular; but the sun and rains and summer thaws have rounded off the surface so that such a field will resemble, on a small scale, a rolling prairie.

VIII

ONE day, as the sun was making its brief appearance above the southern bulge of the earth, Monsieur De Loge, of Revillons, went over to pay a visit to his rival and friend, Donald Flemming, acting factor of the H.B.C. Post at Fort Chimo.

He said, "M'sieu, I wonder if dat daredevil, M'sieu Stryker, has found himself a grave out dere near de Kuglictuk, or if he ees safe."

"It's hard to say, Mr. De Loge," returned Flemming. "He's an old-timer on the trail, you know, and maybe he's pulled through. Let's hope so anyway. But between you and me, I'd be damned if I'd take that trip for some mysterious person named Jack."

"It ees youth, I s'pose, m'sieu. Youth ees afraid of nodding."

The conversation was interrupted by a commotion just outside the door. There was a boisterous laugh, the snarl of a dog, and then the sound of a woman's voice.

The door swung open. De Loge stared, speechless. Flemming dropped his pipe. Ed Stryker, his face and koolutik sparkling with frost, rocked in with his arm around a very charming young lady.

"Hello, De Loge—Flemming," called Stryker. "How's everything?"

De Loge jumped to his feet and wrung Stryker's hand, and Flemming, his face beaming now, was close behind. Then they looked at the girl.

"This is Jack," laughed Stryker.

After that the factors argued at length as to who should act as host to Ed Stryker and the girl he had brought out of the wilds. They compromised. Stryker went with De Loge. Jack stayed with Flemming.

But first Stryker asked:

"Listen, Flemming. Pst! Is the missioner at the Post?"

Jack blushed. Stryker felt a little uneasy. Chevik shoved his head in the door and blinked. And the two factors looked at each other knowingly.

DEAD GAME

By JOSEPH F. HOOK

Big Jed Magill scoffed at the law's puny efforts to halt his crafty poaching. Yet the showdown date was near at hand, for Milt Jordan, the harassed game warden, was preparing the bait for his last trail-trick.

THEIR glances met and locked across the gunwales of the birch-bark canoes. This Alaskan game warden on his first assignment and the poacher of Lake Kenai. A loon's ribald laughter boomed out across the still water as if in derision of this battle of will power between the two men.

Against the backdrop of the snow-capped Kenai Mountains a V of geese circled for a landing on the placid surface. Somewhere in the distance a beaver struck the water a resounding slap with its broad tail. Everywhere the maples and birch created a dab of lighter green against a background of spruce.

Jed Magill's jaws were motionless now, the muscles bulging as his teeth clamped down on a cud of tobacco. Eyes that were narrow-lidded pin points of fire regarded the warden steadily.

A tuft of black hair protruded through the stitching in the crown of his dilapidated hat; the mackinaw was patched at the elbows with doeskin; and the young warden could see the patched moccasin soles as the poacher hunkered back on his heels.

His face was heavily bearded and dirty, and the strong hands grasping the paddle were ingrained with grime. He was the first to break the deadlock, squirting a stream of amber juice into the water. When he spoke, the words slipped furtively from the corner of thick lips.

"So what you gonna do about it, nosy?"

Milt Jordan made no immediate reply. His eyes were busily searching the canoe, noting the dark patches of dried blood, the deer hair clinging to the ribs, and the long, narrow canvas- covered bundle lying on the bottom of the craft.

The warden's steel-blue eyes again sought and held those of the leering poacher. When he spoke, there was finality to his words.

"Nothing right now, Magill. But, come hell or high water, I'll eventually get you with the goods."

Magill's face wrinkled in a cynical smile, and the beady eyes held a malicious, challenging expression.

He growled, "That's all I wanna know, wise guy. Now we understand each other." He dipped the paddle overside and flung back tauntingly, "I'd love to stop longer and chaw the fat with you, but I gotta snag me a nice fat mallard drake for supper. Come and ketch me, snooper."

The warden watched him paddle away. A mallard hen quacked a warning to her fledgling brood, and the ducklings went skittering into the shelter of the reeds at the approach of the canoe. A muskrat interrupted his homeward journey, abruptly turned tail and swam back furiously to the bank.

Presently the new warden sent his birch-bark skimming over the surface in the opposite direction. He lifted it from the water at Primrose, laid it gently on the beach and entered the general store.

Severay prospectors fell silent at his entrance, their glances neither friendly or openly hostile. The storekeeper, sprawled across the counter, regarded him with an expectant expression.

Milt nodded to the loungers, then approached the counter. The storekeeper straightened, and inquired, "Any luck yet?"

JED MAGILL had loudly boasted of his ability to make a monkey out of any game warden who had the temerity to interfere with his illegal calling. Thus far, he had made good that boast, had derived gloating satisfaction from the law's chagrin.

In reply to the storekeeper's significant question Milt answered, "Isn't it a bit early in the game to ask that? I've been here only a few days."

"Jed was in here this mornin'," the storekeeper offered, baiting him. "Said he'd mebbe run into you somewheres on the lake."

"Well," Milt grinned good-naturedly, "if it'll make you feel any happier, he did."

"Yeah? What did he say?" the other asked eagerly.

"What do you think?" Milt countered. "All he lacked was an appreciative audience." He glanced at the loungers, realizing that his every word might be repeated to the poacher.

After Milt had made his purchases and the storekeeper had wrapped them, the latter said, "Watch your step, warden. If any guy ever ketches Jed Magill red-handed he'll know he's been in a real scrap."

Milt said, "Well, that's what I'm here for. And while we're on the subject perhaps you can give me some information. What's the caliber of Magill's rifle?"

The storekeeper's eyelids narrowed. "I wouldn't know, young fella. Can't say I ever saw it."

Milt said with a touch of annoyance, "You sell him the shells for it, yet you don't know what caliber." He picked up his purchases and was turning away when the storekeeper's sharp voice halted him.

"Not so fast, warden. You're as jumpy as a wolf-run buck. You asked me a question and I gave you a straight answer. I'm repeatin' it. I wouldn't know the caliber of Jed Magill's rifle. And you savvy why? 'Cause he don't never buy no shells for it here."

Milt instantly recognized his mistake. "Sorry," he apologized. "I didn't understand."

"You didn't wait to. Another thing, young fella: Ain't no use askin' anybody in Primrose about Magill. Jed don't confide in nobody; that's why he ain't never been ketched."

"That simplifies matters. Thanks."

A prospector nudged his elbow and said, "Lemme tell you something else, warden. The guy that ketches Jed Magill will hafta come up with a new trick. He savvies all the old ones."

Time and again Milt recalled those words when he chanced upon the poacher's tracks and followed them to a fruitless end.

Twice the smell of wood smoke had led Milt to a smouldering camp-fire, from which Magill had beaten a hasty retreat.

On other occasions Milt had spent hours behind tree trunks listening for gunshots. When they came he had traced them down, invariably winding up in a clearing where some prospector had caught a wolverene robbing his food cache and had shot it.

He rarely caught sight of Magill who

flitted through the timber like a shadow and was soon lost in the labyrinth of wild animal trails. Milt changed his tactics, sleeping by day and cruising through the timber by night, hoping to catch the poacher spot-lighting deer. Devil's club, wild rose and blackberry vines took heavy toll of his hide and clothing, and he was not sorry to abandon that method in favor of the old.

He drove himself mercilessly. Success seemed always just around the corner. Each time he encountered signs of a fresh kill, hope revived, lending new life and strength to tired and aching muscles.

After a particularly tough day in the timber Milt went to the store for his mail. He paused on the threshold, noting with surprise the unusual number of prospectors present. Conversation ceased abruptly, and every eye was focused on him as he entered and approached the counter.

A voice sang out, "Why, good evenin', warden. Was you lookin' for me?"

Milt glanced in the direction of the voice.

Jed Magill was grinning at him from a chair beside the cracker barrel.

The young warden's glance darted around the circle of faces, noting the variety of expressions—curiosity, expectancy, suppressed excitement. Anger flushed his cheeks. Then he inquired for his mail, and the storekeeper laid a cardboard carton on the counter.

He said, "Ain't no mail for you today, warden. But a kid brung this a while ago and said it was for you."

Milt hefted it, his curiosity piqued. He turned it over slowly, looking for his name on it and finding none. He snapped the string binding it, lifted the lid. The carton contained two packages. Milt removed the wrapping from one, exposing a fat mallard drake, dressed and ready for cooking.

He unwrapped the second package slowly, anger pulsing through him. It contained a cut of fresh venison loin.

The warden turned, and his glance levelled on Jed Magill, whose face wore a broad grin while the eyes sparkled contemptously. Amid a tense silence, Milt turned back to the counter, replaced the mallard and venison in the carton, tucked it under his arm and left the store for his nearby cabin.

NEXT morning Milt's eyes showed the effects of a sleepless night. He stepped into his birchbark canoe and paddled away from the Primrose landing. He hugged the lake margin, taking advantage of the cover afforded by the overhanging foliage, eyes and ears alert, listening for gunshots, searching the bank for moccasin tracks.

He was far from Primrose when the sun began sinking behind the jagged crests of the Kenai Mountains. Tired, he rested with the paddle across the gunwales and sat watching the crimson rays flooding down the slope of the rugged range and silhouetting the tips of the tall spruce.

A buck and two does stepped silently from the timber, entered the lake and started swimming across at its narrowest point. Milt watched them with thoughtful interest until they were swallowed up by the timber on the opposite shore.

Then he paddled on, still watching the play of fading light among the spruce. At a beaver slide, he nosed the canoe against the bank. And there, mingled with deer and beaver tracks, were the imprints of patched moccasins in the soft, wet earth.

Milt moored the canoe and followed the tracks which led along a well-defined game trail and deep into the timber. He paused occasionally to listen and to peer intently through the dense undergrowth lining the trail.

He came to a sharp bend, peered cautiously around it, then drew back quickly. In that brief glimpse he had seen the carcass of a deer lying at the foot of a giant maple.

Milt stood motionless, scarcely breathing. The imprint of patched moccasins in the soft loam at his feet assured the young warden that this was not the work of marauding wolves.

But where was Jed Magill?

The answer to that did not disturb Milt for the moment; for he was recalling now that, despite infinite caution, twigs had snapped under his feet. Perhaps the poacher had heard them, had retreated deeper into the timber until certain no human foot had created the sounds. Presently, Milt felt sure, when Jed's suspicions were allayed, he would return and begin the task of skinning and butchering.

The warden stepped off the trail into

the brush and inched around the bend until opposite the deer, where he hunkered down in a clump of salmonberry.

The sun dipped behind the Kenais, and the ensuing twilight was of short duration. Darkness fell, and the silence that followed lasted until the moon rose, when the playful splashing of beaver and muskrat in the nearby lake reached his ears.

Milt silently changed position, easing his chilled and aching muscles. A breeze sprang up, riffling the lake's surface, starting the marginal reeds humming. Moonlight, filtering through the branches of the giant maple, created fantastic patterns on the game trail.

Dawn dispelled the last of the young game warden's hopes. Now no doubt remained in his mind but that the elusive poacher had again made good his boast—that the man didn't live who could catch him.

Milt stood erect and flailed his body with numbed arms, restoring circulation. He stepped over to the dead deer and examined the wound in its neck. He rolled it over and looked at his hands in surprise. They were wet. He scraped a finger along the hide. Water dripped off it, and the earth around the carcass was soaked with it. It was self-evident that the deer had met its death after swimming the lake.

Milt remained there some time, brow furrowed in thought, then dragged the deer to the water's edge and rolled it into his canoe. He struck out, then, toward Primrose.

Shortly after his departure there was a faint rustling of leaves and disturbance of branches high up in the big maple. A gentle thud followed as Jed Magill's moccasined feet lightly touched the soft ground. He stamped the blood back into his legs and flexed his powerful arms. He moved silently to the edge of the lake, parted the overhanging brush and watched the young warden's retreat with a cynical grin.

He returned presently to the big maple and, from a nearby clump of salmonberry, retrived the long, narrow canvas-covered bundle. He glided through the undergrowth on another animal trail which led to the lake's margin and the spot where he had cleverly cached his canoe. He tossed the long bundle into it, then stepped in and stretched out full length on the bottom. In a few minutes he was sound asleep.

The sun was setting when he stirred and sat up. He gave the lake's surface a quick scrutiny through the camouflaging branches. He took a hunk of bread and a roasted mallard from his mackinaw pockets, and ate ravenously.

By then the sun was gone and twilight was fanning out across the quiet lake. Magill paddled the canoe into the open, then suddenly checked its progress.

A moving object in the water had caught his attention—a deer's head cutting a widening V as it swam for the opposite shore.

Magill drove the birchbark swiftly forward. When within a few yards of the moving head, he laid down the paddle and unrolled the canvas-covered bundle, exposing a long bow and a number of arrows.

He strung the bow and fitted an arrow. Now darkness was pushing in from the margin of the lake, driving the twilight before it. Seconds were precious. Magill drew the bowstring taut, taking quick aim at the head.

The string twanged loudly in the silence. The arrow sped straight toward its target. There came a distinct plop as the broadhead struck the deer's neck, penetrating deeply.

The deer's progress ceased abruptly. The head tilted sideways and floated away. But there was no body attached to it, only a strip of shoulder hide.

However, there was a movement under the water near it, and a startled exclamation burst from Magill's thick lips when he caught sight of the warden's naked body.

Milt broke surface alongside the canoe, and shook the water from his eyes. The poacher's bearded face was close, the black eyes balefully wicked. Powerful fingers were drawing back the bowstring to its limit, the arrow's broad, sharp head pointing directly at Milt.

The warden stabbed out a hand, striking the gunwale and deflecting the poacher's aim. The bowstring twanged, and the feathered shaft brushed Milt's cheek with a burning sensation.

Magill snarled and reached for another arrow. Milt grasped the canoe gunwale desperately with both hands and kicked

out, uptilting the craft. The poacher dropped the bow and grasped the gunwale in an effort to retain his balance. His fingers slipped off the smooth birchbark, and he catapulted head first into the lake.

As the half swamped canoe floated clear, Magill's fists flashed out savagely. One caught Milt high on the cheek, stunning him momentarily. A tatoo of blows followed, smashing squarely against his face, splitting his lips. He struck back, blindly, desperately, and experienced a twinge of disappointment when he felt the force of his best blows cushioned by the poacher's matted beard.

BOTH men drew apart for a moment, treading water, sucking the cool night air into their lungs. The canoe bulked large in the fast enveloping darkness and within the poacher's reach.

He shot out a hand, gripped the stern and drew it to him. Before Milt could guess his purpose, Magill gave the canoe a quick forward push. The bow caught the warden full in the face, breaking his nose and snapping his head back and under water.

Colored lights flashed across his vision, and the shock and pain of the broken nose nauseated him. Dense darkness enveloped him.

A numbness coursed through his body, stemming out to his limbs.

His lungs cried out for air, and the pain shooting through them was as excrutiating as that from the nose injury. Deeper he sank; and the deeper down, the cooler was the water. For a moment it held him in an icy grip, chilled him to the marrow.

Then movement and strength began returning. He struck out with arms and legs for the surface. Something round and smooth brushed against his hand. Instinctively his fingers closed around it. Then his head was above the surface, air was seeping into his tortured lungs, and the darkness was no longer so dense.

He glanced at the smooth thing around which his fingers had clamped, and recognized the canoe paddle. He turned his head, then, and saw the poacher silhouetted against the lake's surface. Sure of his man now, Magill was working toward him, hand over hand along the canoe's gunwale, blood oozing from nose and lips and crimsoning his beard.

Milt waited until the poacher was within reach, then swung the paddle overhead with all his remaining strength. The edge of the blade cracked down on Magill's skull. For a breathless moment he clung to the gunwale, then the fingers lost their grip, and he sank with a gurgling groan.

The warden inhaled deeply, and dived. A groping hand touched Magill's head, and the fingers entwined themselves in the long, unkempt hair. Milt kicked out, driving himself and his burden to the surface. Clinging to the canoe gunwale with one hand and holding Magill's head above water with the other, Milt rested until full strength returned.

Presently the horn of a new moon appeared. Milt glanced shoreward and was pleasantly surprised to see that the life-and-death struggle had carried them close to land.

He rolled over on his back and struck out, towing the unconscious man. When his feet touched bottom, he dragged Magill up the beach to a stranded log and draped him across it.

Almost exhausted, Milt staggered away into the brush, and soon returned fully clothed. He started a fire against the stranded log, and steam was soon rising from the poacher's sodden clothing.

Magill moaned, stirred and slid off the log. Milt lifted him to his feet and half carried the now semi-conscious man to his own cached canoe.

The poacher's toe caught under the bulge of the gunwale. He pitched forward into the canoe and lay inert on the bottom. The warden straightened out his arms and legs, then stepped into the craft and picked up the paddle.

Through split and swelling lips he muttered, "We're going back to Primrose, Magill, to give those cracker-barrel experts somthing new to talk and laugh about, at *your* expense."

The Ghost of Camp Seven

By RUSSELL W. LAKE

"You'd think that when a man was druv off, he'd stay druv," mourned Muley Jones, the homemade sourdough lawman. But Lou Stevens was no self-respectin' murderer . . . his ghostly antics were freezin' up the whole Alaskan wilderness.

LOU STEVENS stood on the hill behind his claim and stared out over the Alaskan wilderness. He was a big man, massive of shoulders, with a bold countenance and heavy hands. His face, smooth-shaven and brown, was set in brooding lines. The three delegates appointed by law sat on the ground nearby, watching. They had watched him lugging bags of dust from his shack to a secret hiding place of his own somewhere beyond the hill. They were honor bound not to spy on him or try to find where he buried it. At least not yet.

Lou took a last look at the creek and turned his eyes upon them. "I didn't kill Sven," he said again. "But I can tell you who did. A damned claim jumper. You watch Sven's ground. First fellow who moves in there's your murderer!"

He went slowly down the hill. They stood up to watch him picking his way among the rocks of the gully and up the other side until he was swallowed finally in the deep forest. He took with him only the clothes he wore. No grub, no matches, no gun. That was the edict.

Their job finished, the delegates hastened down to the saloon which was the focal point of Camp Seven. Their haste was occasioned by their eagerness to get in on the division of the murdered Sven's earthly holdings. Meaning gold. By that time Sven was decently if hastily, consigned to his last resting place and the divvying up was on. By virtue of his position, Muley Jones officiated at the scales, weighing out Sven's dust with sober exactitude. He had to divide it among two hundred and twenty-five men. It was surprising how much dust Sven had accumulated. Every man in camp got thirty-one dollars and fifty cents.

The next day everybody in Camp Seven kept a sharp eye on Sven's claim, remembering what Lou had said. The second day also. It was a rich claim but nobody dared to so much as step on it. Going up or down the creek they made a wide detour, hurrying past, looking the other way. Black Jock who had the claim next below Sven's accidentally kicked his coffee pot and it rolled over the line. It was the only one he had, but he let it lie.

It is problematical how long this might have gone on except the situation suddenly became involved and Camp Seven was thrown into the unique position of harboring a ghost.

On the third morning the earliest risers who plodded to their work at the creek, were amazed to observe sitting in the middle of Sven's claim no other than Lou Stevens. He greeted them cordially and went on smoking his pipe and gravely contemplating the new markers he had driven into the ground. It was incomprehensible.

Word of it was borne hastily down to Muley Jones. Muley was the Law. Since there must be law even, or perhaps especially, in a settlement so remote as Camp Seven the job had fallen to Muley Jones by common consent. He was an old timer, having come into the Territory in '69, and knew everything that had ever happened there. He had the vocabulary of a judge, the sober mien, and besides he had time to fool with such stuff. All he had to do all day long was run the saloon.

Muley took his responsibility seriously. He thought about Lou Stevens all that day and most of the night. The next morning he called court into session and requested that Lou be brought before him.

All who were assembled in the big room, all two hundred and twenty-five of them, fell silent watching Muley's round white face. Muley wore his judge look, a stern, uncompromising visage that boded ill for evildoers. He spread his hands and pushed some glasses aside and mopped the bar carefully. Then he got up on his stool. For a long moment he sat with bowed head while through the room there was the sound only of heavy breathing. Muley spat expertly into a small coffee can and speared Lou with an inexorable glare.

"Lou Stevens," he said, "you was sentenced to die."

"I was sentenced to leave," Lou corrected mildly.

"Same thing. Now what you got to say for yourself?"

"It's this way, Muley. I got out there tramping through the bush and got almight hungry. The mosquitoes were biting something fierce. When I thought that the nearest town was three hundred miles I knew I just couldn't make it. You told me I had to leave but you didn't say I couldn't come back. So I figured that if I had to starve to death I might as well do it sitting down and with people around me instead of fighting it out alone by myself in the hills. So I came back."

"And jumped Sven's claim."

"Sure. I was sentenced once for killing him, so what's the difference? You can't sentence me again."

"This is very onregular, Lou," Muley said. "The like of it's never been heard of before. Up to now when a man was druv off, he stayed druv. Seems like any self-respectin' murderer ought to have the decency to take his medicine, but you—You

make me mad, Lou."

"Sure am sorry, Muley."

"Then get out."

Lou shook his head. "I sort of like it here. Always have. Fact, when Siwash told me about his strike and brought me here with him I says, I like this place, this is where I want to be. Still feel the same way, Muley."

Muley looked over the assemblage. "Did you hear that?" he snorted. "He likes it here! You'd think he was judge, instead of me. Now, on account of this is a out of the ordinary case, the court will listen to any idees you fellers might have. Not that I'm likely to change my mind but I ain't so pigheaded that I won't give nobody a chance to speak his piece. Who's got a idee how to handle this thing?"

A general furrowing of brows greeted this unusual request. Black Jock lumbered to his feet. Black Jock was a huge, black-bearded hulk of a man whose paws hung out of his coat sleeves like gnarled timber. "Hang him," said Black Jock, and sat down.

"Me too," spoke up One-Eye Jake.

"Ain't legal," said Muley. Muley was a stickler for the law. "On account of we already sentenced him onct and can't do it again. Anyways, we don't believe in hangin'. You got to think up something better than that."

"We could stake him down in the woods and let the ants eat him," someone said hopefully.

Muley did not deign to answer. Old Siwash Jenks was next to take the floor. He stood with his skinny arms behind him, teetering on his heels and chewing his tobacco in measured rhythm. Siwash was a dried-up little fellow with a perpetual stubble of white beard that never seemed to grow any longer. The most notable feature of Siwash, outside of his being the first to discover gold here, was the marvelous fact that nobody had ever seen him spit.

It was the source of much conjecture as to what he did with all the juice. If it were true that he swallowed it, which of course was impossible, they shuddered to think what his belly must look like by now. But they never gave up watching him, as an audience watches a magician to see how he does it.

"I've knowed Lou Stevens since he was a little tyke," said Siwash. He started off slowly and gathered fire as he went along. "I knowed his Pa before him. Lou was the fightenest young'un I ever did see and to this day he ain't never been knowed to lose a fight. So I can understand right well how he come to get in a fight with that no-account polecat Big Sven—and I can understand him lickin' him, too. But like I've said before I'm sayin' again, Lou ain't the kind to sneak up behind a man and clout him with a club like some public benefactor did to Sven two days after. On account of them facts which you all know as well as me, Lou Stevens ain't guilty. So I say let him go." Siwash started to sit down and then straightened again. "What's more, you ought to invite the man that done it to come forward and we'll rig up some kind of a medal and pin it on his chest."

MULEY regarded him severely. "You said the same thing at the trial, or words to them effect, Siwash. The fact that Sven was a dirty, low-down four-flusher with a disposition like a she-bear in the Spring ain't got nothing to do with it nohow. Murder's been done, and the law's the law. Lou was convicted on the evidence and sentenced. Didn't I give him more'n a fair show? I gave him hints and openings, in fact I practickly got on my knees beggin' him to say it was self-defense. But he wouldn't cooperate. Wouldn't admit it. Anybody so all-fired stubborn deserves to get what's coming to him. Anybody else got something to say?"

Nobody else had anything to say. Muley waited a reasonable time and then slid off his stool. "All right, then. I've made up my mind." He seized a beer bottle by the neck and three times smote the bar. Not so hard as to break the bottle of course, and lose the refund, but hard enough that all could hear.

"Men," he intoned, "Lou Stevens was found guilty in this here court of murder and by due process of law was thereby sentenced to get the hell out of this camp without grub, matches, or gun. As you all know that was a sentence of death. You, Lou Stevens, should be dead by now, leastwise pretty soon. The dignity of this court

has gotta be held up and no smart aleck is going to make a farce out of our judgments. So I say to you, you are dead. Legally dead. I pronounce you defunct. Beginnin' now."

Muley cleared his throat and his voice was deeper. "We have before us, gentlemen, a dead man. It ain't Lou Stevens standing there. It's his ghost." He paused to let that sink in. "Now what is a ghost and how do you treat it? You can't feed a ghost, can you? You can't sell grub to no ghost. You can't give, sell, trade, or otherwise provide anything at all to a ghost even though it may appear before you in the form of a man and talk with a man's voice. You can't have any traffc with it, not even looks or conversation. And," he crashed his fist down upon the bar, "any galoot that tries it is gonna get sentenced to the same punishment! Court's adjourned. Bar's open. . . . . .to livin' men only."

No one knew for sure how Lou Stevens lived through that winter. That is, almost no one. Lou of course knew, and so did Siwash Jenks. Lou was totally ignored. Never a word, never a smile, never even a look. When he walked down into camp he walked alone, unattended and unseen.

Siwash waxed secretly affluent. He was getting a little too creaky in the joints to work much at the diggings any more and spent most of his time in his tent or the saloon. Yet his pile of gold dust grew and grew and it didn't bother him at all that it was ghost money. As he explained to Lou one time, it wasn't that he was charging so much for the grub as for the chances he took—and chances ran mighty high.

Lou became thin and Siwash shriveled. Both were living on half rations. It wasn't so bad for Siwash, he never ate much anyway, but Lou was young and strong and cursed with an enormous appetite. So all winter long he had a pain in his stomach. Now and then he was successful in snaring a rabbit back in the hills but not often enough to do much good.

At the beginning the problem of supplying grub to the ghost presented extreme difficulties. Siwash discovered at once that every move he made outside his tent was observed by prying eyes. It was all on account of Muley having a hunch that it would be Siwash, if anybody, who would attempt to feed the condemned man.

Siwash realized the enormity of his task right away the first day. A little after dusk he came out of his tent and hobbled up the creek. He should have known better. Black Jock materialized from the shadows and loomed before him.

"Where you goin'?" Black Jock inquired.

"To have my head examined," said Siwash. "Where you going?"

Black Jock approached and slapped Siwash's thin hips with both hands. Nothing happened.

"What you doing up here this time of night?" Black Jock said.

"I'm going for a walk," Siwash told him with elaborate patience. "It's my constitutional, like them business men down in them big cities take every night. Every night I take a walk up the crick, just to keep in shape."

Black Jock reached down and dragged Siwash's shirt out of his pants. A package spilled out, revealing cold biscuits and a slab of red meat.

"What's that for?"

"That," said Siwash, "is to eat, you danged fool. What do you think it's for? I'm taking this walk, see, and it's all uphill and every time I walk uphill I get goshawful hungry. So I'm taking me a snack."

Black Jock blinked and dragged a fist across his forehead. "Raw?"

"I got matches, ain't I? And I reckon in this woods I can find lumber enough to make a fire. And I ain't lived in the Territory thirty years without learnin' to fry meat. I'll show you how some day when I get time."

Black Jock was uncertain what to do next. They hadn't told him about this. He looked at Siwash and down toward the saloon and back to Siwash. "Guess I'll go with you," he growled at last.

They walked together up the stream, Siwash limping painfully and Black Jock strolling beside him. They passed Lou without a glance and Lou's hungry eyes watched them go. Lou was one of the few who lived beside their claims, the others preferring to be nearer the saloon.

A LITTLE way beyond the diggings, Siwash eased himself down upon a log. "Some nights I don't walk so far," he

said. "Some nights I'm kinda tired." Black Jock was watching him so, grumbling under his breath, Siwash gathered wood and built a fire and cooked the meat. He ate with forced relish, dividing it equally with Black Jock. Then they walked back down to camp.

In the days that followed Siwash found that he couldn't stir out of his tent without one of them being around, sauntering after him. They were watching Lou also, obliquely of course, which eliminated any chance of contact. All winter Siwash never went near Lou but took to hiking along the far side of the hill that bordered the stream, or disappearing into the underbrush. Once in a while the watchers were mystified to observe Siwash sitting in the top of a lofty tree calmly looking over the country.

Muley was convinced it was Siwash who was getting grub to the ghost but in spite of all the sly little traps set and sprung, he never found out for certain. Siwash had developed a method of his own and his only regret was that he couldn't share it with Muley and the others. It was that clever.

Lou divided his working time between his own claim and Sven's. He put in enough labor on both to indicate to all that he intended to hold them. Although his neighbors were forbidden by law to see him, they were not forbidden to see the results of his efforts and it was results that proved up a claim. Sven's ground was hardly less rich than Lou's own, which was the source of much discomfiture to some of the others whose claims were petering out.

Black Jock was next below Sven's, One-Eye Jake first above. Black Jock, always of uncertain temper, was particularly difficult that winter. His was one of those claims which were drying up at an alarming pace. A snarl became his customary manner of speech. Anyone meeting him for the first time would have assumed he hated the world and all in it—further acquaintance would have confirmed the impression. It was harder on him probably than on the others because he was right next to where the ghost was reaping gold by the handfuls. Often he went up to visit Jake and grumbled loudly about the "Blankety-blank thief stealin' a dead man's dust."

Most of them however started off considering it a big joke. It was intriguing to have a man around the law said they couldn't see. When they were within earshot of him they would bellow insulting remarks to one another regarding Lou's character, morals, or parentage and then double up in profane mirth. Through some boyish quirk of mind it was like talking behind a man's back to his face. They even developed a game. In the evenings they would congregate nearby and by sly artifices attempt to induce one another to look at the ghost. All good, clean fun.

It is hard to tell when the change began. Maybe it was one evening when a group of them were squatting on their heels in the middle of the path. They had tired of the game and since their positions were right, began shooting craps. Bud Chirpy came up from camp, walking slowly with his head down. Bud was the youngest man at Seven, a mere kid, and was taking his first gold strike most seriously.

"What's bitin' you, kid?" said Soapy Gus.

"Aw, nothin'. I was just thinking I gotta move my sluice box tomorrow and I ain't sure I can do it. It's gettin' so I can't hardly reach it with my shovel any more."

"What you need," Soapy said, "is a good strong man. Somebody that can haul it outa the mud for you." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Ask Lou, here. He can do it with one hand."

Bud's face brightened. "Yeah. Hey, Lou! How about—"

Then he remembered. He jerked his head away and his eyes widened in sudden terror. Their chuckles faded as the blood drained from his face and he swung away and started running wildly up the hill. They had to chase him all the way down through the gully, up the ridge and into the forest before they could catch him and bring him back.

Or the change might have begun the night a bunch of them were in the saloon to get out of the wind. The wind whistled and moaned eerily outside and at times heavy gusts crashed against the north wall and jarred the whole building. They were drinking in desultory manner and Muley was watching sharply for emptied glasses when Twitchy Totten burst in, wild-eyed.

Twitchy got his name because of some nervous ailment that made him constantly seem to squirm inside his clothing. They always figured that Twitchy was a little more than half crazy, the way he acted all the time.

Twitchy stood just inside the door, hatless and hair blown over his face. He jiggled and shook as though in a native dance. "I can't stand it any longer!" he screamed. "I ain't goin' to stand it! I'll shoot myself!" He tottered to the bar and great tears trickled down his cadaverous face. Frank Lowden standing next to him patted his shoulder and uttered soothing words, meanwhile winking at Muley.

Twitchy lifted his head and stared from one to another. "Up there on the hill is a dead man," he intoned. "Why don't he lay down? He walks around and works and whistles and sings. I walk past him and I think in my mind, here's a man that's dead; he ain't never gonna come to life no more. I can't look at him or talk to him because he's dead, but there he is. Lookin' at me, wantin' to talk. Dead. You won't never talk to Lou Stevens no more. He's dead. Ever think of that? I do. I think of it all the time. He'll always be there, just a-starin' at you and following you around like a lost soul that ain't got no home. That's what he is, he's a lost soul. He don't belong here on account of he's dead and he don't belong in hell on account of he's alive. He's just danglin' half way between. A spirit seekin' a place to go and rest, and there ain't no place that will have him. I think in my head, it ain't right. A dead man oughta die and be put in the ground and not left to wander around starin' at folks forevermore. You won't never get rid of him, all the rest of your life you'll have a dead man standin' alongside of you. It's scary. I'm scared. I'm scared right now."

TWITCHY held up a bony finger and thrust his face forward as though listening to voices in the wind moaning around the building. He gazed up into space out of the corners of his eyes. "It gets worse," he said in a hoarse whisper, "on nights like this!"

There was movement along the bar as men shivered and hastily gulped their drinks. Twitchy wriggled to the door and went out, closing it softly behind him. Siwash chuckled. All eyes turned to him accusingly and he subsided. The place cleared out shortly, leaving Muley disconsolate in the emptiness so early in the evening.

Whatever it was that started the change, the whole camp rapidly settled into strained grumpiness. There was a rash of acrimonious arguments between the best of friends. Nobody laughed any more. Nobody except Lou. Lou and Siwash. Often they heard Siwash cackling inside his tent all by himself.

Even those customarily most cheerful and boisterous went about surly and glowering. Jan Pritchard and Flick Hudson had been trail partners for fifteen years, inseparable in work and play. "The Gold Dust Twins", they called them. Jan and Flick had adjoining claims and of course lived together, spending their evenings playing double solitaire. They even put their dust into the same bags. It was the perfect partnership and the whole camp marveled that two men could have interests and characteristics so closely related they could get along without squabbling so many years.

But the sullen wind blew through the camp and it blew on Jan and Flick. They ceased their good natured raillery between themselves. They began to be testy, and to growl, and finally to snarl. And one night they fell out over a game of solitaire and practically wrecked the shack before they were separated. Breathing heavily and glaring, each decided then and there in loud tones that he would no longer live or even associate with a dirty so-and-so like the other. A few minutes later they got up and went at it again over who would have to move out and build a new brush shack.

It was like a contagion sweeping up and down the creek and through the camp, touching everyone with the burning fever of dissension. Seemingly no one escaped it except Lou and Siwash, and perhaps Muley. Muley was in a position in which he couldn't afford to be cantankerous. Business was business.

Black Jock sank more deeply into his natural biliousness. He was more than ordinarily hard to live with. Men shied away

from him because of his venomous animosity that simmered and bubbled in imminent danger of explosion. He sat in his tent like a big black hairy spider daring anyone to approach. But no one did. Since Sven's violent departure, Black Jock was the biggest man in camp. And the toughest.

Lou Stevens took immense delight in all the goings-on. He sang and whistled and laughed from morning until night and the more he laughed the darker grew Black Jock's swarthy face and the grumpier the whole camp became. It got so bad that sometimes even Muley took a drink. Muley, the teetotaler.

The whole business was a source of great frustration to Muley. Somehow it seemd to reflect on him and his judicial position. He couldn't help but feel that in some way or other he ought to be able to step in with some masterful stroke of jurisprudence and stop all this monkey business, but for the life of him he couldn't think what it could be. So Muley continued to fume and fret behind the bar of his saloon and Lou went on puttering around his claims on the creek and Black Jock wallowed in choleric truculence and the whole camp reeked of malice.

Spring arrived and melted the snow and thawed the ice, and work on the claims spurted with fiendish vigor. Lou never had seen them work so hard. He wondered about it until word got around, subscribed to by almost everybody, that the entire crew never would stay through another winter like the last one. They were getting the gold now while the getting was good, preparatory to seeking pastures more to their liking.

Muley heard this with consternation. He gazed about at his considerable investment and sweat oozed from him at thought of having a ghost town (he winced at the word) on his hands. His outlay for building and merchandise was paying off handsomely but it would be even more handsome if it could continue longer. For days he wracked his brain for means of getting rid of the ghost before the live ghost made a dead ghost out of the town. It must be admitted that he even considered mayhem, but it is to his eternal glory that he rejected the idea immediately—well, almost—as being unworthy of a judge.

Strangely enough, Black Jock at once softened up. One day he even was seen to smile, in a rusty sort of way. On the other hand, Lou ceased laughing and grew silent.

One day Lou fixed up a pack and walked over the hill in plain view of all. He failed to return that day and they began to breathe easier. Maybe the damn fool had finally given up and decided to take his medicine like a man. As the days went by and no Lou, they breathed easier and easier until by the end of the week they were breathing almost normally.

But the ghost showed up one morning, working Sven's claim as though he had been there all the time.

IT was then that Muley called a meeting. The entire camp crowded shoulder to shoulder into the big saloon and Muley climbed up on the bar.

"Gentlemen," he said, "it has come to our attention that some of you have been shooting off your mouths about leaving in the Fall. Now I ain't one to beg nobody to stay but I'm just thinking of all the gold that'll go to waste. Of course, it won't go to waste either; there'll be others come in and take over them claims. Men with more guts and an understandable desire to pick up easy money. You've got the claims all opened up and producin' and then you stick your tails down and skedaddle. Somebody else collects the juice.

"All on account of a man that don't exist. On account of a ghost. And it don't even wear a sheet to scare you. It walks around and talks and wears pants like a man, but you're scared of it. What kind of a kindergarten is this?"

"We ain't scared," someone growled.

Muley laughed. Derisively. "Like I said, it make me no difference whether you go or stay. I'll sell licker to the new ones that come as well as to you. Only I hate to see a fine bunch of fellers cheated out of their just rewards by a ghost. There's still a lot of gold in them claims and if you don't get it somebody else will. And if you leave, where will you go? Traipsin' up and down Alaska, piddlin' around the creeks with a gold pan year after year hoping to see a trace of color and prob'ly not seeing it, sweating and starving and si-

washing it through the bush, and winding up broke and begging for a chance to clean out spittoons in some lousy saloon for your drinks. All the while you'll be hatin' yourself for leaving a sure 'nough strike because you didn't have the guts to stay! Shooed off your own claims by a big hunk of nothin', a danged ghost!"

Black Jock got up. "We ain't scared of no ghost. That ain't why we're leaving a 'tall. We're getting out because there ain't no law and order in this place and because life ain't worth living when everybody looks at you like he hates your insides. I'm going where I can have friends again. I'd rather clean spittoons than live another year like this."

Somebody snickered and Black Jock wheeled about.

"Men!" roared Muley. "Think of all them thousands of dollars left in your claims. You gonna give all that up?"

The murmur started hesitantly but collected volume as it went along. Muley was hitting them where they lived. It swelled and roared and, fed by contagion, became a full fledged pandemonium. Even those joined in whose claims were thinning out. Only Black Jock was silent and glowering. Finally one little fellow rose and held up his hand for quiet. "I ain't goin' no place. Never said I was. Oh, mebbe I did mention something about it but I was just foolin'." He glared about defiantly. "I reckon a lot of you was foolin' like me."

The bellowing started up again and the sound of it was good. Muley heaved a sigh. He got down from the bar and a sweet smile spread over his countenance. He mopped his brow and sank back upon the stool. In fact he was so overcome that he forgot himself to the extent of shouting: "Come on, fellers! Let's celebrate! Drinks on the house!" Sudden fear showed in his face. "Just one apiece though."

After that Black Jock grumbled and snarled at his unprofitable claim again and Lou returned to his cheerful state. Now and then Lou would yell, "Boo", across at him and in the evenings took to holding up a bag of dust and shouting: "Look what I got today, Blackie! How much did you get?"

Black Jock of course paid no attention but one evening he whirled his shovel about his head and smashed it against his sluice box so hard that he broke not only the shovel but also the sluice box. Lou sat down on the gound and whooped.

after dusk, a roaring, jostling crowd of men formed a swaying circle down by the creek a few rods beyond Siwash Jenk's tent. Men were running from all directions to join in. Somebody rushed into the saloon and shrieked for everybody to hurry and bring lanterns. The place emptied magically. Now they were here and now they weren't. Muley stood behind the bar and observed with complacent satisfaction the full and partially full glasses. Paid for and not drunk. He went along and methodically emptied them back into bottles. He leaned against the bar with his chin in his hand contemplating the immediate future. A thing like this always brought a spurt in business afterward. Suddenly he ripped off his apron and made for the door. He'd missed the last one, the one with Sven, but he couldn't miss this, by golly. The hell with the saloon—no business now anyway. Any time Lou Stevens got mixed up in a fight it was eminently w o r t h seeing, but when he tangled with a gorilla like Black Jock, that was something a man had to see.

Accompanied by lusty bellowing from more than two hundred hairy chests and lighted by the flickering gleam of fifty lanterns, Black Jock and Lou Stevens were concentrating seriously on annihilation. The crowd gave vociferous approval of each solid blow, of each act of homicide, such as when Black Jock kicked Lou in the chest and sent him sprawling. They were loud in approbation when Black Jock followed up by leaping upon the fallen man and began pummeling his face into jelly. This unbiased gathering were equally approving when later Lou executed a flying tackle and brought down the ponderous Jock and sat on his belly beating him about the jaws.

Black Jock was a different kind of adversary than Sven had been. Where Sven was slow, Jock was swift. When Sven was methodical, Jock was a tornado. The pent up rage of months gained release in explosive savagery. And opposing him was Lou Stevens, a little thinner now, but still the man who never had been known to lose a fight.

THE DECEIVERS

The life of an Eskimo is just one darned taboo after another. For example, he must never mention the name of the animal he is going to hunt that day, or the spirits will hear him and warn the seal or the caribou or the musk-ox of the hunter's approach. But it is all right for him to make his meaning clear to his hunting companion, and to deceive the spirits by speaking of the seal as "the animal that lives under the ice." No spirit could be expected to figure out that seals were being discussed!

SLY HUNTERS

Eskimos have learned a great deal of their hunting technique from the animals north of the Arctic Circle. It would be natural to assume that Eskimo hunters evolved the technique of waiting at a seal hole, with upraised spear, until the animal comes to that particular hole for a breath of air; that the brown-skinned hunters might even get together and "drive" the seal to a particular hole, as we drive deer, jack-rabbits and coyotes. But the Eskimos learned this trick by watching polar bears. While one of the shaggy monsters stood in tense expectancy over a particular breathing hole, several other polar bears would break in all the nearby holes until the seal, driven from one hole to another, would in time reach the one where the bear selected as the killer awaited him.

That was a battle the like of which was never seen before or since. News of it spread up and down the river and along the creeks, all the way to the Bering Sea

About the middle of July and just and down across the unmapped tundras to the little towns edging the Gulf of Alaska. Men talked of it over lonely camp fires and under the glittering lights of gold camp saloons. They discussed it along with news of the latest gold strike on far-flung creeks, or traded details in back-country stores.

For a solid hour Jock and Lou gave battle, at first in profligate expenditure of savage energy, and later in dull determination. Fists beat upon heaving chests that winced at torture piled upon torture. Fists smashed into bleeding faces and brought further spurts of bleeding.

When it was over, both were lying in the mud. Black Jock held his hands over his face and blubbered with the agony of torn flesh and a smashed nose. Lou lay nearby, quietly and with his eyes open but unable to move.

The crowd was silent now, awed by the most terrible fight Alaska had ever witnessed. It was elemental, brutish, a spectacular display of human strength and endurance.

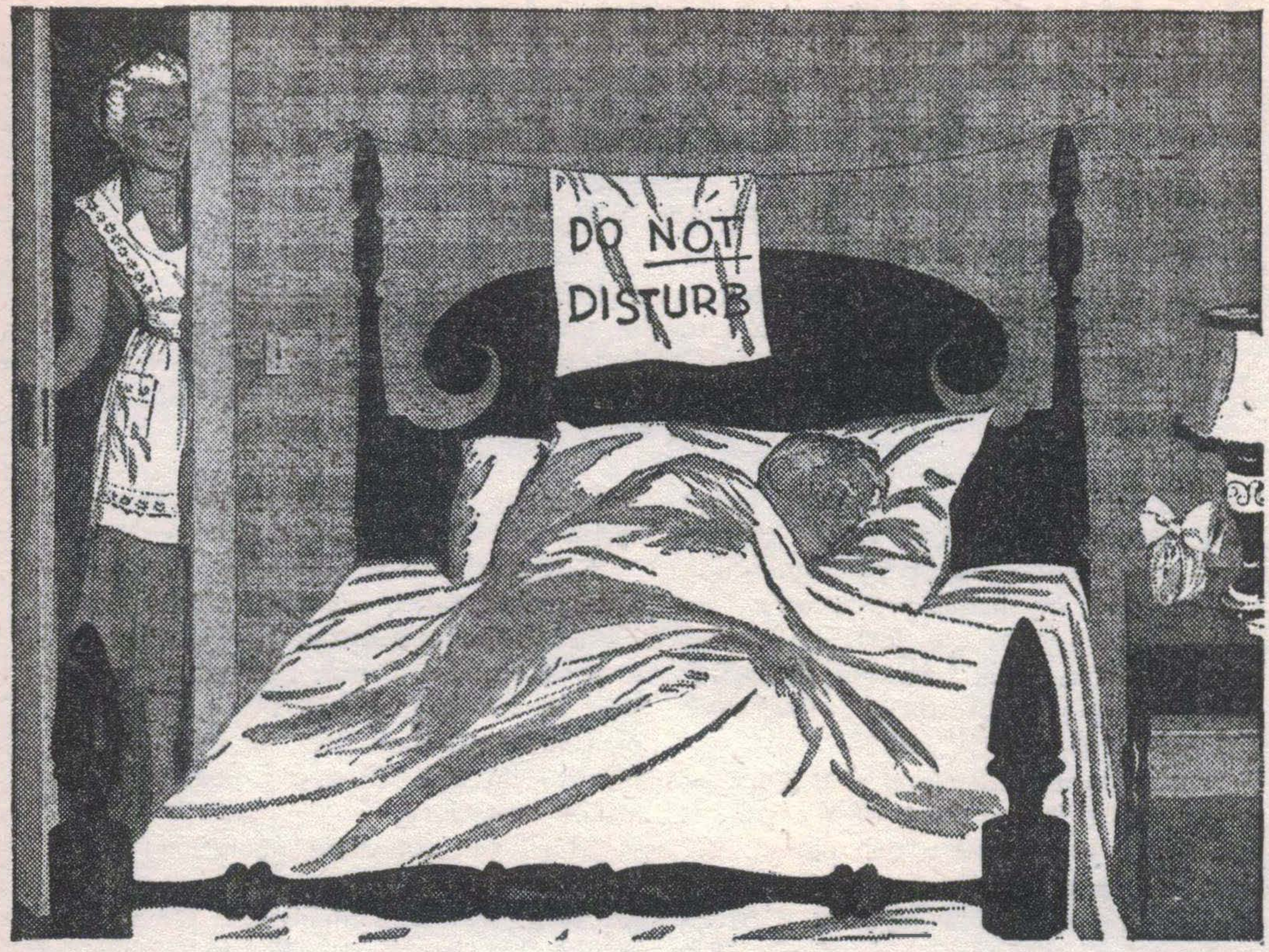
It was a long time before Lou got to his feet, bending one joint at a time. "There's your murderer," he said huskily. "He killed Big Sven for his claim. He tried to kill me tonight in the same way and for the same reason, but I was watching for him."

"It's been a long wait, eh, Lou?" Siwash chortled. "Fellers, Lou has been sittin' on that marker stake all winter and half the summer waiting for somebody to try to kill him. That's why he come back, knowin' that sooner or later the murderer would turn up. He even hid out in the hills for a week to give them a chance to jump his claim. Black Jock was the most likely prospect on account of the kind of gent he is and on account of pickin's was getting mighty slim. I reckon it druv Jock near crazy to see all that gold so close."

"What I wanta know," interrupted Muley, "is how in tarnation Siwash fed you all winter?"

Lou carefully wiped a trickle of blood from his eye. "You ask too many questions, Muley," he said wearily. "But I don't mind telling you this. The fellow that fed me slew my overwhelming hunger in the same way David slew Goliath."

"Ain't never heard of them fellers, or that slewin'," Muley said doubtfully. "Or is that a danged riddle?" He pondered it for a while. Then he straightened and became once more the judge. "Anyway, now that we're all asembled I'm announcin' I'm holding court in the morning for the trial and sentencin' of the dastardly murderer of our neighbor, Big Sven. On account of new evidence that has come up. And another thing," he smote the air with finality. "No more ghosts. I'm sick of ghosts. I'm gonna make damn sure Jock don't get to be a ghost and come back to haunt this here camp! Come on, Lou, let's have a drink."



What is so right about this picture?

Is it that Dad's finally retired . . . the old alarm clock gagged for good?

Is it because now Mom won't have to watch him leave for the office any more, looking just a little bit tired?

Or is it because now Dad and Mom will be starting an especially happy time of life *together?*

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THE GUN-VULTURE OF CARIBOU LODE

By JOHN STARR

Marshall reaped a bloody harvest there on rich Caribou Lode. The tally was two dead, and the gun still smoking, until a strangely mismated pair joined hands and hearts in a Northland oath that proclaimed: "the gun-vulture must pay!"

A TREMOR of excitement swept through Dick Wall as he comprehended the staggering significance of that which lay in his prospector's pan. He straightened to his feet. His knees were trembling. His face was flushed.

"So help me," he breathed, "we've struck it rich! We've struck it rich!"

There was no mistaking that glint of yellow in the bottom edge of the pan: it was coarse gold from a rich pocket. Besides the dust, there were three or four nuggets the size of a big pea. Caribou Lode had indeed paid off. And Dick Wall's eyes were riveted upon that gold at the present moment.

"Just wait till Pa gets back!" he went on aloud. "I'll bring him straight here and show him. It'll be the biggest hour in his life! Gee! After a whole summer's work on the old claim—for just bare wages and now we've run plumb on to a pocket! And him kind of gettin' old and givin' up hope, too."

The boy swept a glance about him. Already it was late afternoon; the sun hovered low above the rough horizon of spruce and tamarack.

A wild desire to leap in the air, to run and shout out the good news to the forest-lands took possession of the lad. Raw gold! Life doesn't hold many thrills as great.

He might have given in to this impulse, too—had it not been that at that moment there reached his ears the sound of grating gravel a little way up the creek. Some one was coming down the half-dried waterway toward him. And before he could move, the figure of a man came into view and shortly behind that man came another, smaller of build than the one who preceded.

Both carried rifles. Hunters, no doubt, Dick judged, out in search of winter meat.

And in the same instant he was taken by a quick impulse to hide that gold pan he held in his hands. But the approaching men were too close now, he realized, for him to do this. It would just serve to arouse suspicions.

"What you got there, youngster?"

It was the bigger man who asked, and his voice was not unpleasant. He was a good-looking man, smooth-shaven, though his lips were a little thick and coarse.

Dick hesitated for a brief interval wherein the two men came nearer; then he said, endeavoring to keep his voice calm, casual:

"Just a—a little colors."

"Colors eh?"

"Yes," responded the boy. "That's all we get out of this old claim. It don't hardly pay us to work it."

"Let's see 'er," said the first man, approaching over the stones.

THERE was, Dick comprehended with misgivings, nothing that he could do. The other peered into the pan, and the boy heard the quick intake of deep breath. It was a matter of perhaps ten seconds or so before the big man lifted his eyes to meet the youth's. When he did, his eyes held a queer look. "Colors," he murmured, "hm . . . call that colors, eh?" He was gazing deep into the frank, clear-blue eyes of the youth.

"See that, Bob?" he addressed his smaller companion who stood beside him, a


HOTEL
STORE

young man with a weak, receding chin, "he calls that *colors!*"

The other man nodded, nervously.

"Well, congratulations, kid," the first individual went on, and his manner became at once friendly; "you've struck it, sure as shootin'; can't blame you for not wantin' other people to know *that*. I struck it that way once myself. I know how you feel."

He smiled down upon the boy, and Dick Wall felt his first fears leaving him.

"Thanks," he said, "it—it does look good, doesn't it?"

"It sure does," said the man, "you were born lucky, boy."

"It ought to sluice out big, don't you think?" Dick went on eagerly.

"Big is right," agreed the man heartily "that looks like over three ounces in that pan, maybe four."

"All of that," Marshall concurred with his small companion.

"Gee, I hope it does. Pa's always had hard luck all his life. This'll cheer him up."

"Pa?" queried the other; "your father, is he?"

Dick shook his head.

"No," he replied, "no, he isn't my father. You see, I just call him that. He's my pardner."

"I see; too bad he couldn't 'a' been here to see you pan that out."

"Yes, I wish he had been, but he'll appreciate it just as much when he gets back."

"Gone away, has he?"

The young man pointed off to the east.

"He's out there lookin' for meat. Be back tonight, probably in a few hours. He's worked hard, Pa has, for this. He's earned it good and plenty."

"So? When did you take this claim?"

"Early last summer."

"Been out since then? Been pretty busy, I suppose."

Dick failed to comprehend the hidden significance in that casual question.

"No," he said, "we've stuck right by the old claim ever since we happened on it."

"I see. Well, we better be moving along, eh, Bob? Getting late."

And Dick Wall failed to see the nature of the glance that passed quickly between the two men as they started away over the gravel-bar. Had he seen it—well, things might have happened differently. As it was, with a fastbeating heart, he was thinking only of the happiness that his discovery was going to bring to an old man.

IN the dusky light of the waning day, old "Pa" Daley stood in the doorway of his cabin. His head was bowed. His thin, gaunt arms were lifeless at his sides. His thin hair was gray, and he looked his years—which were many.

"Why did you do it, lad? You with your whole life ahead of you—and that fine little gal awaitin' for you down below. A shame, that's what. It's going to be hell for her when she learns. I'd rather it'd been me, Dick, lad."

As the words fell from his thin old lips, his eyes again sought out that oblong mound of fresh-turned earth at the corner of the cabin. Mute and significant, that.

"Yes, sir, lad, I'd rather it'd been me; me—well, it wouldn't 'a' mattered so much. But you, with all your hopes . . ."

Suddenly, from up-river, there came the sharp, cutting crack of a high-powered rifle!

Pa Daley tensed.

"Now what was that?" he demanded, of himself.

He waited silently, his eyes fixed upon the reach of river to the left. And in a few seconds a canoe shot around the wooded bend in the stream and bore down toward him.

There was but one man in the small craft. This fact Daley put down as rather odd. For it isn't the way of men up there in Alaska to hit it off alone. It isn't considered good judgment; too many things can happen.

The canoe came closer.

"Knows how to handle a peterboro, all right," was the old man's thought; "he's been there before. Wonder what's up? He seems to be in a mighty big hurry. He's diggin' water hard."

Daley's eyes continued their study of the approaching stranger. Tall and lean and tanned was the man who knelt in the stern, plying the paddle as only a white-water man can. Once he paused

in his efforts to throw a glance back over his shoulder in the quarter whence he had come. Then he resumed his paddling.

Pa Daley judged by the stranger's actions that he had spotted him there on the bank. The canoe drew closer to the bank.

"You alone?" came the query.

"Yes," Daley assured him.

In the next moment the bow of the craft touched the sandy, sloping bank. It was not till this took place that Pa Daley noted that which caused his heart to quicken. He stared at the bottom of the canoe, where lay a second figure between the two middle thwarts.

"He—he's sick?" Daley asked.

"He's shot," came the reply, and the tall, lean man picked up the silent form and bore it up the bank a little way. There he deposited it upon the ground and bent quickly over to make an examination.

He tore the shirt away from the body, and Daley, looking down, saw where a bullet had left an ugly mark just below the right shoulder. "Got him in a pretty bad place," he commented; "low down."

The bronzed stranger nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid it touched his lungs. There's a chance it didn't, though; his lips aren't bloody?

"How'd it happen? Accident?"

The kneeling man looked up oddly. "No, no—I reckon it wasn't any accident."

"Then some one shot him?"

"Yes." The man closed his lips hard upon the word.

"Who?"

"I reckon that's what I'm going to find out," replied the stranger slowly; "yes, I reckon I'm going to find it out. You got any neighbors?"

Pa Daley shook his head.

"Not that I know of," he said, "but I heard that shot; must've been just around the bend there."

"It was. I started to land there, and—"

"Some one let loose with a gun, eh?"

"That's it," said the other, "and when I saw that Al was hit, I figured the best thing for me to do was to get out of there as fast as I could and tend to him."

"Your pard, is he?"

"He's my brother," said the tall stranger.

"Gad—that's hard lines."

"Yes, it's hard lines, all right," returned the other, "but I reckon it'll be harder lines for the man who did it."

He paused and nodded toward the cabin.

"That yours?" he asked.

"Yes. We'd better take him in there."

When everything possible had been done for the wounded man, the stranger moved slowly to the cabin door, opened it and stepped out. It was growing pretty dusky by this time. Pa Daley went out with him.

II

THE stranger appeared on the point of speaking when he checked himself and looked closely at the mound of earth beside the cabin. At one end of the mound, a rough-hewn slab of board was implanted upright. The younger man took off his old felt hat and stood bareheaded there.

"I didn't know," he said slowly, "that you'd had a misfortune here. Recent, I see."

There was genuine, heart-felt sympathy in the man's tones.

"Yes, it happened day before yesterday. And a fine lad he was, too."

The older man was silent for a little; he was looking out over the barren, silent forests to the south—there where the frosts and the winds had whipped the scarlet leaves from the trees. And the stranger saw, so close was he to the other, that the old man's eyes grew moist.

"How did it happen?" he asked at length; his voice was kind.

"Well, it's something I can't quite understand," began Daley, and his brow puckered more than ever.

"You see, he'd always had a sort of fear of dynamite, Dick had. Queer, too. He wasn't afraid of most things, but he was of dynamite. Wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole. We didn't use it very often—just now and then on the hard-rock; th' claim's a mixture of that and placer.

"Well, th' other day, day before yesterday it was, I took my rifle and went out to try for some meat. When I got back that night—nigh on to dark it was—he wa'n't here at th' shack. So I went over

to th' claim—it's over in that direction not more 'n a quarter-mile."

He pointed a hand up-river.

"And—and I found him there, poor lad."

"Dead?"

"Yes," said Daley, "he was dead; was buried under a pile of rock."

"How'd you account for that?"

"Too short a fuse, probably, though I can't figure for the life of me why he tried using the stuff when I was gone. Perhaps he wanted to overcome his fear of it; I don't know. But it was a shame, poor lad. And him with a girl waitin' for him, too." Again a trace of huskiness crept into his words.

There was silence for a little space then the tall stranger said thoughfully:

"Yes, it's too bad. And it was sort of—um-m-m, queer—his using the stuff when you were gone, wasn't it."

Something in his tone caused the old man to regard him closely.

"What you thinkin'?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing, I guess."

"Yes, you was," replied Daley in an odd tone; "I know. You was thinkin' somethin' you didn't say, just then. What was it?"

"Probably I'm wrong," the younger man retruned slowly, "a fool for thinking it. But since you ask, why, I was thinking that perhaps your pard's death was an accident—like Al's!"

The hush that followed was intense. In the chill air, burdened with the message of deep snows soon to come, there seemed to be something of menace.

Old Pa Daley stood staring out across the fast-darkening river for a space. When at length he spoke, his voice was a bit unsteady:

"If I thought that—thought it for just one minute—"

"Maybe I'm wrong," said the other, "but we were shot at, and there must be something the man's afraid of—afraid we'd learn."

"I've got a sneakin' hunch you're not wrong, pardner," replied Daley, and his withered old hand went out to meet the strong, rugged one of the stranger. They were big hands, those of this stranger; long and hard and big-boned.

"Your name, pard? For I reckon we're goin' to see somethin' of each other."

"Halliday," said the other simply; "Hal—to them as know me. And yours?"

"Daley. I reckon Dal will do."

And so, in that simple way—which is after all the way of the North—it was sealed; a convenant where an old man and a young man had sworn silently to stand or fall together.

III

IT was about in the middle of the meal that the girl looked up and asked:

"Marshall, what were you shooting at?"

In the lamp-light that flooded the tent, the man met her eyes.

"When?"

"About a half-hour ago; just before you came up to the tent."

"Oh, that?" The man addressed as Marshall smiled, though he did not meet the girl's eyes. "I just took a pot-shot at a duck; thought one'd go good for supper."

The girl appeared to consider this statement for a moment; then she said:

"I thought the ducks had all gone South."

"This one hadn't."

"Marshall, look at me."

"I'm looking."

"You've been acting queer of late."

"I have?"

"You have."

"In what way?" inquired the man.

"In several ways. And I want you to tell me something."

"What is it?"

"I want you to tell me why my brother went out to Nation yesterday."

"Why, I've told you several times. He went out to get supplies. What's got into you?"

"I'm wondering a little about that myself," she said in a curious tone. "Suppose you look me in the eye—and tell me the *real* reason why Bob went out. He was in a hurry and you know it."

"Supplies, I tell you—"

Marshall started but the girl interrupted him.

"That's a lie, Marshall! We don't need supplies. It's pretty near time for the big freeze-up and we've got to hurry if we're going to get a boat for White Horse.

You know that. Now tell me the truth!"

The man's eyes had fallen before her penetrating gaze.

"Bob and I have changed our plans a little," he explained; "we've seen bear signs; want to stay for a little good hunting—"

"Look here," put in Ruth, "when we started on this hunting trip, you professed to have the interests of my brother at heart. You knew his weakness. You said you wanted to help. That's the big reason why we came. You said you'd try to keep drink from him. Now—no, look at me—I want the straight truth!"

Marshall started to speak, but he cut his words short and turned on the improvised chair to face the front of the tent.

A soft step had sounded outside, and hardly had he turned when the flaps of the tent were parted by two hands and a man stood facing them. The lamp-glow fell full upon him.

It revealed the lean, bronzed quality of his features—features that were strong in line and that somehow breathed of white-water, rugged portages and the snow trail. An old felt hat was pulled low over his forehead and from beneath the brim the man's keen, gray eyes took in the two inmates of the tent.

There was something in that face that held Ruth Gardner's attention. For just a fleeting interval the man's eyes met hers. And again she got the impression that here was a man who had lived a clean life in the open. A thing like that stamps itself on a man's face.

She wondered vaguely why her heart quickened as he looked at her; could not understand the strange feeling that came to her in that moment. Then she saw the stranger turn his glance upon Marshall. And she heard him ask:

"Did you fire that shot a while back?"

"What shot?"

"If you fired it, then I reckon you know," was all Halliday said to this. His voice was unemotional, but the girl noted that his eyes narrowed just a little more than usual; and she noted, too, that his big hands were clenched at his sides, so that the large knuckles of them showed white in the lamplight.

"I took a shot at a duck," rejoined Marshall— "if that's what you mean."

"Maybe it is," said Halliday curiously, slowly, as if weighing each word; "rifle shot, was it?"

Marshall's eyes flashed sideways to Ruth's face, held there an instant and then came back to the stranger.

"Yes," he said.

"How long ago?"

"Say!" blurted Marshall, a touch of desperation in his voice, "what in damnation are you driving at—?"

"How long ago?" repeated Halliday in that same emotionless voice.

"About a half-hour back," replied Marshall shortly, "since you're so set on knowing."

Halliday nodded.

"Yes," he agreed, "I'd say it was about that."

He paused oddly after the words. Then added:

"And I guess you and I are sort of thinking of the same thing—that *duck*."

Ruth Gardner flashed a wondering look at Marshall's face. The expression on his countenance was a distinct shock to her. His habitual composure was gone; and in its stead there was an ashy paleness on his face. Why? Why had the stranger's words produced such a change in the man? What was the meaning of it? Her mind, for the moment, was dazed.

As from a distance, she heard Marshall say brokenly:

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You and I figger different there," said the stranger; "reckon I'd like you to step outside a minute; reckon there's something I'd kind of like to say to you."

Marshall neither moved nor spoke; the dead whiteness had not left his face.

Hallidays countenance was like a mask. Not the slightest emotion was betrayed there. He might have been carved out of wood. Ruth Gardner thrilled strangely at the picture he made, framed there in the tent-flaps.

Vaguely she heard him say:

"Guess we understand each other, stranger. I'll be moseyin' along now. But I'm not going so very far—be right close by for a spell. And if that *duck* you shot at should die—"

He left the sentence that way. And

without so much as another word or look, he turned and was gone.

IV

A DEEP silence fell upon the tent after the flaps had fallen back into place. The sound of retreating footsteps outside had died away. The hush of the forestlands pervaded the place.

It was the girl who broke the silence. Meeting Marshall's eyes, she said:

"What did he mean by that, Marshall?"

"Mean by what?"

"What he said about that *duck*."

The man seemed to shake himself from the spell into which he had fallen. Shrugging his big shoulders, he answered:

"How should I know?"

And then, after a moment's pause wherein he appeared to gather courage:

"He's crazy, I guess. Maybe thinks all the game around here are his pets. Crazy, that's what he is. Had me scared for a minute, though—"

"Yes," said Ruth slowly, looking away from the man's face to the entrance, "yes, I think he did."

"Did what?" came the senseless question.

"Had you scared. You were white when he said that."

She was thinking, as she said this, of the stranger's face—clean of line, unfaltering of glance and with the stamp of the woods strong upon it. She saw it as clearly as though once more it were before her. And one thing she knew. And it made her heart quicken:

It had not been the face of a crazy man and what was more, it had not been the face of a man who would lie!

She was not looking at Marshall at the present moment; her eyes, rather, were upon the spot where the tall, bronzed stranger had stood a minute before. But nevertheless, she felt Marshall's eyes riveted upon her!

She turned her head just a bit and out of the corner of her eye checked up on that which her instinct had told her. Yes, he was watching her. She did not move for a little; tried to act as if she were unaware of his intent scrutiny.

And in that moment while the silence held deep and unbroken, while she knew the man was watching her, she allowed her mind to run quickly over the happenings of the past few days. And, doing so, she felt a fear take hold of her; a fear that was the greater because it was intangible. But this much she knew: Marshall was not what he pretended to be. He had purposely lied about her brother. She was certain of it. And just as certainly she felt, too, that he was lying now!

Why? What was behind it? What prompted him to lie? And suddenly she felt her distrust of the man lapse into something very near dread. Some far-reaching intent was in his mind.

" . . . And if that *duck* you shot at should die. . . ." Those parting words of the stranger returned to her and the manner in which he had said them. Like a bolt from the blue, she found her mind entertaining a staggering thought: could it be that that stranger had referred to a *man?*

Even as the thought came to her she was conscious of a strange physical sensation—a prickling in her blood as if it were ebbing suddenly from her face.

She could scarcely resist a wild desire to whirl upon the man now and demand an explanation—to even go so far as to confront him with what she half suspected. Probably she would have done this very thing—had not all her instincts warned her against it.

If what she half-believed were right—and if Marshall knew her thoughts—then there would be a very concrete danger in the man. If he were of that stripe, there was no telling what he would do. No, her safety lay in keeping quiet—and awaiting developments.

LATE that night she lay awake in her blankets inside the tent. It was a starless night and pitch dark. Now and then the rising wind rustled the canvas a little. Just outside the wall of the tent, she knew Marshall was sleeping.

This knowledge of his nearness did not serve to let her fears abate. Rather, they grew and took more definite shape with the passing of every minute. She came to fear the night and the nights to ocme; to dread the future. Where was her brother? Again and again she asked her-

self that question. Had he really gone out to Nation? Or had Marshall lied about this, too?

And suddenly she came to wish that a thousand miles separated her from that man outside—instead of just one thin wall of canvas. A man who had professed to be her brother's friend, who had said he wanted to give the youth a fresh, clean start in life—and who, she knew; had lied.

Then abruptly she grew tense in every muscle, waiting, her hearing strained. Above the mounting wind, she thought she had detected the sound of feet! Scarcely breathing, she waited. Again she heard. And this time she was sure. It *had* been the sound of feet. Marshall was not asleep. He was walking about!

What was he up to? What did he intend? Her fears multiplied.

For several minutes she heard the sound of his moving about. At moments the wind rose higher and deadened all other sounds; but when, at times, it died down, it was to hear again the noise of the man's movements.

Prompted by both her fears and her curiosity, she rose slowly from her blankets and moved toward the entrance to look out and discover, if possible, the reason for Marshall's moving about. But just as she reached the closed flaps, they parted before her, and with a sudden leaden feeling gripping her, she saw the vague black form of Marshall facing her!

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then, fighting down her fears, Ruth said:

"What do you want?"

"Haven't said I want anything, have I?"

"Then what — what are you doing here?" She wondered, as she spoke, if the dread she felt were betrayed by her voice.

"Never mind," said Marshall "you're to get busy and help pack up the stuff. Understand?"

"Why?"

"Because we're moving — that's why. Now get busy—"

But she interrupted him.

"Why are you moving?"

"Never mind that part of it. I'll tell you that later. I've got my reasons. That's enough."

He said it in the manner of a man who has the upper hand, and who knows he will be obeyed. Then he turned and like a black blot melted into the night.

It had been on her tongue to give voice to her suspicions, to demand, here and now, an explanation, an accounting. But she had allowed the moment to pass, and now realized again that, notwithstanding anything she might say, she was, for the time being at least, in the man's power.

He was armed, and she was not. Therefore, she knew, her wisest course lay in giving in to his commands—and waiting silently for her chance. It would come sooner or later, she felt certain. And when it did . . . Well, the future would take care of itself. And again she thought of the tall stranger who had come there to the tent that evening. In him, she knew, she could trust.

Suddenly Marshall's voice reached her, breaking in upon her thoughts:

"Don't hear you doing anything."

"I'm going to," she said, and started to light the lantern with hands that trembled.

V

THROUGHOUT the long hours of that night, Halliday sat beside the bunk where his brother lay. Time dragged by. To Halliday the night seemed endless. His heart was heavy, for he knew that Al had carried his last portage. Knew, with a sense of irreparable loss, that his brother's next "carry" would be into another realm.

The years, with their memories, pressed in upon Halliday; years wherein Al and he had hit it off together up there in the North; years of share and share alike, of taking the hard knocks and the turns of good fortune as they came, with a smile, as is the way of men worthy of their salt.

It is just such things as these that bind two men together. Some call it "pard-love." But whatever it's called, it's one of the biggest and the finest things on earth.

A wind rose as the night wore along. A low light burned on the table beside Halliday. Over in the bunk against the

If Polio Comes!

Keep children with their own friends. Keep them away from people they have not been with right along, especially in close, daily living. Many people have polio infection without showing signs of sickness. Without knowing it, they can pass the infection on to others.

Try not to get over-tired by work, hard play or travel. If you already have the polio infection in your body, being very tired may bring on serious polio.

Keep from getting chilled. Don't bathe or swim too long in cold water. Take off wet clothes at once. Chilling can lessen your body's protection against polio.

Keep clean. Wash hands carefully before eating and always after using the toilet. Hands may carry polio infection into the body through the mouth. Also keep food clean and covered.

Watch for early signs of sickness. Polio starts in different ways—with headache, sore throat, upset stomach, sore muscles or fever. Persons coming down with polio may also feel nervous, cross or dizzy. They may have trouble in swallowing or breathing. Often there is a stiff neck and back.

ACT QUICKLY—IT MAY LESSEN CRIPPLING

Call your doctor at once. Until he comes, keep the patient quiet and in bed, away from others. Don't let the patient know you are worried. Your doctor will tell you what to do. Usually polio patients are cared for in hospitals, but some with light attacks can be cared for at home.

Call your own Chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis if you need help. (Look for the number in the telephone book or call your health department for the address.) Chapters are made up of people in your own town or county, banded together to give help to polio patients. Polio is a very expensive disease to treat. *But no patient need go without care.* You pay what you can afford—your Chapter pays the rest of the cost of care. This help includes payment of hospital bills, nurses and physical therapists, transportation to and from hospitals or clinics, treatment after the patient leaves the hospital, wheelchairs and braces when needed. This is not a loan. The American people make these services possible by giving to the March of Dimes.

Remember—there is no "quick cure" for polio and no way as yet to prevent it. With good care, most people get well, but some must have treatment for a long time.

The more you know about polio, the less you fear. More than half of all people who get the disease recover completely without any crippling.

other wall, Daley was sleeping. Time passed. The wind continued to mount with every passing hour. It was the cold breath of descending winter that was sweeping out of the North.

And along toward morning, mingled with the soughing of the wind, there came to Halliday's ears the sound of driven snow against the north window of the cabin.

AT last morning came. Gray and cold and somber. The world had changed its garb. From the cabin, the scene had altered. As if at the touch of a magic brush, the brown, seared earth had turned to white. Once more the wheel had turned, and the long winter had set in.

That breakfast there in the cabin was a silent affair. Seldom did either Halliday or old Daley speak, and then but briefly. When it was over, Daley dressed for the cold and went silently out of the cabin. Halliday again took his post beside his dying brother.

A silent hour passed and then suddenly the door was thrown open and old Daley entered, breathless and excited. His shoulders and fur cap were mantled with white where the falling snow had gathered.

"Pard," he gasped, "your—your hunch was right!"

"Dick, you mean—?"

"Yes."

The speaker's face was white, and Halliday saw that he was trembling with the force of his emotions.

"What did you find out? You haven't been gone long."

"Our discovery post—" Daley went on excitedly; "I got to thinkin' of what you'd said after I went to bed last night, and figgered I'd go take a look this mornin'. Well, I did, and, Halliday, th' discovery post Dick an' I planted is *gone!*"

"It *is?*"

"Yes. And that ain't all. They's been another one driven in a thicket a little ways from where mine stood! Th' claim's been jumped, all right!"

"What was the name on the new notice"

"They's *two* names."

"What are they?"

"Marshall and Gardner," stated Daley.

Even as he spoke, there returned sud-

denly to Halliday's mind the sentence he had overheard the night before upon approaching the tent up the river, " . . . my brother went out to Nation. . . ." He had thought little of it at the time. Now, however, in the light of what Daley had just said, the importance of that sentence dawned upon him. Quickly he told Daley about it.

"An' you figger by thet thet some one's gone out to record th' claim?" the old man said.

Halliday nodded.

"It looks that way, Dal."

"But how," insisted Daley, "would they 'a' known thet th' claim wa'n't *already* recorded?"

"Reckon they got your pard to talk, Dal. He was only a kid, you know. And green up here. 'Twouldn't been hard to get him talkin'."

"But why," Daley went on, "why would they 'a' done all thet—done what they did to Dick—when th' old claim ain't never paid more'n wages? Figger you kin answer thet?"

"They wouldn't, Dal," said Halliday; "nobody would—unless there was something out there to *make* it worth while!

"You mean—"

"Reckon I do, Dal; there's gold out there somewhere on your claim. And lots of it! There must be."

"But wouldn't I know if—"

Halliday shook his head.

"I may not have it reckoned right, Dal, but I think I have. It looks to me as if your pard, Dick, made the discovery—a pocket or whatever it is—while you were out hunting. And these two men happened along and found out a lot of things from the lad by acting innocent and friendly—your bein' out hunting, for one. Then they did away with him in a manner so's you wouldn't suspect—so's they'd have time to beat you to the recorder's office."

PA DALEY looked as if he had been struck a blow. For a moment he was silent, his eyes upon the floor; then he said brokenly:

"It ain't so much th' gold I'm thinkin' of as it is my pard."

And muttering strangely to himself, his head bowed, he opened the door and went out into the storm.

"Hard lines," said Halliday to himself. "I pity him."

Then he turned his eyes again upon his brother. It may have been ten minutes later that he noticed Al move a little. And shortly after, the man's eyes opened.

And as they opened, the dying man did a strange thing: He *smiled!*

Halliday leaned closer and said thickly:

"Anything I can do for you, Al, old man?"

The other shook his head a little; the smile still lingered on his face.

"Guess not, Hal. We—we've had some good times together, haven't we, Hal?"

Halliday tried to speak, but his voice choked him.

"And, pard," the other went on, his voice no more than a far away echo, "do you know, pard, I've got a hunch. . . ."

"What is it?" said Halliday quietly.

"It's that there're more good times a-comin'."

Halliday peered closely at his brother, pity in his heart. Was it possible that Al didn't know he was dying—that he was building up hopes where there was no room for hope? He dreaded lest he were.

But the failing man's next words put his mind at rest.

"No, I wasn't thinkin' of it th' way you are, Hal. I was thinkin' how as God don't make friendships between men, only to break 'em. He isn't runnin' things that way. And we've been friends, Hal. You an' me. There're other trails awaitin' that we haven't traveled yet. An' Hal, old man—"

"Yes, Al?" The tears were in Halliday's eyes.

"I—I'll be waitin' for you alongside th' trail, when th' pack gets heavy-like, pard. I'll be waitin'. . . ."

And with the smile still lingering on his features, he took the last long trail.

Shortly after, Halliday stepped out of the cabin.

HALLIDAY found Daley passing back and forth through the falling snow in front of the cabin, his chin sunk upon his chest, muttering to himself. A lonely figure of an old man. Thinking, Halliday knew, not of the gold—but of the thing that had befallen his pard.

"Guess you can get your rifle now, Dal," said Halliday softly.

The old man stopped and turned. Their eyes met; and he seemed to understand. Although no words were spoken, he apparently comprehended that both of them had lost their pards now—and that now there was a task awaiting them.

"All right, son," he said in a low voice, and moved to the cabin door.

In a few minutes the two men started across the snow-swept river in Daley's canoe.

The wind had a savage cutting edge to it and the snow was coming fine and hard —straight out of the North.

A few days now, and that river would be locked as tight as a drum. Movement would cease; and over all that great Northland a white endless stillness would reign.

When the two men gained the farther bank, the canoe was securely drawn up on the shelving edge, and they proceeded at a fast pace for some distance. Then Halliday, who was in the lead, grew more cautionus in his movements.

Suddenly he stopped, pointing ahead with his free left arm.

"What is it?" asked Daley.

"It isn't here!"

"What ain't?"

"The camp. The tent. They've gone!"

"Well, they can't a' gone far," reasoned Daley.

"Gad, I hope not!"

"They couldn't 'a' made it out—not with the canoe gone—and whoever went to Nation must 'a' took th' canoe."

"Where do you reckon they've gone to then?" asked Halliday.

"Farther back in th' timber," said Daley. "They're back in there somewhere an' we'll find 'em. An' when we do, between you an' me, pard, God help 'em!"

VI

THE discovery that she had just made increased Ruth Gardner's fear of Marshall until it reached the stage of dread. The man had taken all the knives —even including the small kitchen knife— and hidden them all somewhere. What did that point to?

From where she stood inside the tent

at the present moment, she watched the man as he busied himself piling fresh wood on the fire that had been built just in front of the open tent-flap for the purpose of radiating warmth into the canvas structure.

The snow was swirling about him as he worked, hissing as it fell into the fire. Now and then she saw him look in her direction. She no longer questioned her mind. She *knew* now. He had done something—something terrible—from which he was fleeing. And he feared *her!*

His nervous actions of the night before, his hurried breaking of camp in the early hours of the morning—and his coming here, two miles or more farther back from the river—all these actions could point to but one thing. She dreaded even to think of that thing.

All too clearly, as she now studied his every movement, she saw the peril of her position. She was alone with him—and helpless, without the slightest weapon, should he attempt to violate the code. And there had been a light in his eyes on several occasions that day that could be interpreted in only one way.

A plan had been forming in the back of her mind, and she resolved to put it into execution at the first chance she got now. At the first opportunity, she would slip away and find the stranger back there by the river. He had said he would stay near by. And when she found him, she would demand an explanation; and—if what she feared were true—would ask his help.

In a few minutes she believed the propitious moment had arrived. Marshall had gone into the adjacent timber to gather more firewood—or so she believed. She slipped from the tent and ran toward the left edge of the little clearing. Her pulse beat fast, for she realized what it would mean—should Marshall detect her in her act.

She had covered perhaps half the distance to the woods when a sharp command sent her heart into her throat. She stopped, rooted in her tracks.

"Where you going?"

She waited, not knowing what to say, feeling sure that the man understood her motive. He came through the veil of descending snow at a run. He stopped within a few feet of her.

"Where you going?" he demanded again.

And then it was that, momentarily, the girl's fear gave way to a blaze of spirit. Defiantly she said:

"I'm going to that stranger! I'm going to find out what's happened!"

Marshall stepped closer.

"No you're not!" he said. "You get back in that tent!"

When she hesitated, he seized her roughly by an arm. She struggled to get free, but it was useless. He held her in a grip that was like a vise. He pushed her forward, and once again she found herself inside the tent.

He laughed brutally.

"Try that again and I'll be rougher with you."

"So you *are* afraid of something!" she charged: "I knew it!" But her heart was not as courageous as her words.

A numbness came over her mind and body. She had played her card—and lost.

With a sudden movement he seized her in his arms. His hot breath was like fire on her cheek. She tried to wrench free of his grasp, but could not. And then, overcome by the hopelessness of her situation, weighed down by the knowledge that she was at the man's mercy, things grew black before her eyes.

VII

HALLIDAY laid a warning hand upon Daley's arm.

"Smell that?"

Daley took a deep breath and nodded.

"Smoke, ain't it?" he said.

Halliday nodded, and peered up the thinly-wooded ravine down which the snow was being driven by a piercing wind. They had arrived after more than half a day of searching, through the snow-ridden woods.

"Better go easy," cautioned the younger man; "they may have a reception for us—can't tell."

They moved on up the ravine, and abruptly, rounding a clump of young spruce, Halliday saw. Through the snow he could see the vague outline of a tent, a fire burning directly before it.

"I tell you what you do," said Halliday

In a guarded voice; "you stay right here, so in case they *should* escape you can stop 'em with your rifle before they can get out of the clearing."

"And what *you* gonna do?" questioned Daley.

"I'm going to sneak up to the tent and put 'em under arrest."

"Seems to me," observed Daley, "that *you're* takin' all th' risk."

"Oh, I guess not," said Halliday, but Daley knew better.

"Th' girl, too? You gonna arrest her?"

"Yes, she's *bad,* like her brother. Why did you ask?"

"Oh, I dunno. Women just don't seem to go with a dirty deal like this.

Looking closely at Halliday, the old man saw what he thought was a fleeting look of pain flash over his features; then this gave way to a hardened intent.

"This one's bad, all right," he said grimly; "isn't living with a man like that enough to damn a woman? Although she's got a face that would fool you, I swear, Daley. Yes, we're going to take her in."

There was a hardness, a finality, in his tone as he concluded. He started forward into the clearing; then paused and added:

"Don't forget, Dal. If you see 'em getting away, don't be afraid to use your gun!"

"I won't," said Daley.

Halliday crossed the short open space and gained the edge of the tent. He moved noiselessly up alongside the wall until he reached the front corner. Then he spring out between the fire and the open flaps, rifle leveled upon the interior.

"Put 'em up!"

Marshall whirled from the girl to face the speaker. His face was putty color. His arms went up. Behind him, Halliday saw the girl. Her face, like the man's, was pale. She appeared almost on the point of falling, and one of her hands, Halliday saw, had gone to her forehead, as if to clear her vision.

"Pretty good acting," was his thought. What he said was:

"You, too. You put 'em up!"

"But I—I haven't done anything!" she cried. "You don't believe—you don't think—"

"I'm believing what I see," replied Halliday sternly; "now raise up your arms! You can talk later. You'll get a chance to, but not now."

With a look in her face that Halliday never forgot, he silently obeyed his command.

Halliday said to Marshall:

"Unbuckle that belt in front and let it drop to the ground. And be careful of your hands when you bring 'em down; this rifle goes off easy."

Marshall did as he was bid. The belt, with its revolver, fell to the floor.

"All right. Now give it a kick over here," directed Halliday.

Marshall continued to do as he was told. Halliday pocketed the weapon.

"Now stand over in that corner of the tent—facing it, your back to me."

The girl's pale lips moved:

"Tell me why you're doing this?"

"I reckon you can answer that for yourself," replied Halliday.

"What has this man done?"

Halliday looked at her face closely, searchingly.

"Murder," he said.

He saw her stagger back a little as he spoke the word. Her eyes did not leave his face.

"You don't believe—you—you don't think that *I've* had a *hand* in it?"

Halliday found it hard to meet her eyes. Doing so would, he knew, just serve to make his duty harder. Yet for a moment his mind seemed to waver.

There can be no doubt but that Halliday had, for that briefest space of time, been thrown off his guard. Otherwise it couldn't have happened.

When he met the girl's eyes the following instant, it was to see her features set in lines of inexpressible horror.

"Watch out!" she cried.

Halliday swung his rifle about. But he was too late. He was only in time to see the completion of the act—a desperate act of a desperate man. Marshall had seized up a stick of firewood, and had leaped upon Halliday.

Under the force of that impact, the rifle on Halliday's hands clattered to the ground. Blackness surged over him, and he felt himself falling. But in the last instant of consciousness, he managed to call:

"Look out, Dal!"

But even as he shouted the warning he realized that he had made a mighty mistake, and could have bitten off his tongue. Daley, coming across the clearing, would now be at the mercy of Marshall. Marshall would shoot him down. Good God!—what a fool he'd been!

All this flashed through his mind in the space of a second or two. And then as if it were miles away, he heard a gun roar. But the roar merged with a still greater roar that filled his whole mind and he slid off into a void of nothingness.

VIII

HOURS may have passed—or minutes. Halliday had no way of telling. In reality, it was only a few minutes after he had fallen into unconsciousness that he came to with a dull, throbbing ache in his head. Slowly his brain cleared, though the terrific ache still persisted.

As the mist rose from his mind, he realized that he was lying upon the ground, that over him was the sloping roof of a tent. He struggled to a sitting position, and again his head swam so that he could scarcely see. Then memory rushed back upon him. Not more than five feet from him he saw Marshall standing. The man's face was milk white, and he was staring past Halliday, at something beyond!

Halliday turned his head. Ruth Gardner was standing there, a rifle in her hands. Halliday recognized it as his own. Then the truth burst on him! She was pointing that rifle at the man—at Marshall! She had him covered!

Her eyes dropped for a second to meet his; then went immediately back to her prisoner. With her gaze upon Marshall, she addressed Halliday:

"I've been a fool, all right," she said; "I trusted that man. He was going to kill you, too—with his revolver—but—"

"Me, *too!*" groaned Halliday, the blood freezing in his veins. She meant that old Daley—

He staggered to his feet. The blood seemed to leap through him. He faced the girl.

"Did he shoot Daley?"

"Yes. And then he turned on you.

But I'd managed to get hold of your gun in the meantime."

With a leaden ache in his heart, Halliday ran out of the tent. There was almost a foot of snow on the ground now, and he stumbled through it, calling, "Daley—Daley—!" again and again. His own voice seemed to choke him, for a deep liking for the old man had sprung up within him.

So thick was the snow falling that he was almost upon the silent form in the snow before he saw it. He bent quickly over, his heart pounding.

His hands fumbled over the man's body. What he discovered made his face lighten. Then, leaning close, he observed a red cut on the side of the forehead that the falling snow had nearly covered. It was, Halliday found, merely a flesh wound where a bullet had hit and glanced off the bone.

"Be all right in a few minutes," he assured himself; "stunned, that's all. Thank God for that!"

Halliday rubbed the limp hands, and in less than a minute the old man stirred and opened his eyes. His lips started to move, but at that instant there came a sound from the tent that froze Halliday; it sent the short hairs on his neck up stiff. A rifle-shot had sliced the stillness!

Halliday leaped toward the shelter. Then he stared in. There stood the girl, the gun held slantingly down before her. And in line with the muzzle of that gun lay Marshall. She turned her pale face toward Halliday.

"I—I couldn't help it," she said, "I—I had to."

"Went for you, did he?"

"Yes. He—he thought I wouldn't dare shoot, I guess—tell me, have I killed him?" she asked fearfully.

Halliday stooped over the figure, then straightened up. "No, miss," he informed her, "you haven't."

"He'll live?" There was evident relief in her words.

"For a few days," said Halliday, and she knew what it was he was thinking. For Marshall, there waited—the law.

"I—I reckon, Miss," began Halliday, then faltered and stopped.

"What?" she prompted.

"I reckon," he started again, "that, that

BLACK MARKET!

In the early days of the gold rush at Nome, Alaska, a steak cost $7, a night's lodging in a bunkhouse $5, and an apple $1. A few years later, during the Fairbanks stampede, a sandwich cost a dollar, a flimsy sheet-iron stove cost $50, and baking-powder biscuits sold for $2 a dozen. In Dawson's early days, before Nome and Fairbanks were discovered, candles sold at a dollar apiece.

Once, during the shortage, a local racketeer cleaned up almost $10,000 by putting candle-wick (which was used for calking boats) into candle molds and pouring in diluted condensed milk.. This immediately froze in the 40°-below-zero temperature, and the darned things looked like candles! These beautiful "wax" candles sold like hot cakes, and the miners laid in big stocks. Before they got around to using them, the candle manufacturer was well on his way to the very convenient haven over the boundary.

I've sort of got to ask your pardon."

"For what?"

"For the way I thought of you. I had you figgered wrong, and—" His eyes dropped again, and so it was that she did not see the look therein. But in the days to come she was to understand—and glory in that understanding.

Then Halliday went out to help bring old Daley into the tent.

IX

THIS much of the story of Caribou Lode Alsakans know. It is a matter of record up in that land; and to this day the tale is told in the road-houses and on the trail.

There are, it is true, many versions regarding what became of young Gardner. Possibly the truth has never become known, although it is a fact that he succeeded in reaching Nation. His name is there on one of the recorder's books.

And there are some who will tell you that the man was seen reeling toward the river-dock along toward dusk; drunk, they say. Perhaps. Perhaps not. Old-timers like to talk. But it is prettly generally accepted, though, that in some way the Yukon claimed the man.

Although even this is not known definitely. And perhaps it is just as well, for he was a weakling and he went the way of all weaklings in the North.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 of NORTHWEST ROMANCES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1950.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.:

Before me, a Notary P blic in and for the State and county aforsaid, personally appeared Jack O'Sullivan, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Editor of NORTHWEST ROMANCES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily, weekly, semiweekly or triweekly newspaper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Glen-Kel Publishing Co., Inc., 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Editor Jack O'Sullivan, 130 West 32nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.; Managing editor, none; Busnness manager, T. T. Scott, 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporat on, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual member, must ge given.) Glen-Kel Publishing Co., Inc., 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.; J. G. Scott, 130 West 42nd Street, New York 18, N. Y.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so stat .) None.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, bold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

(Signed) JACK O'SULLIVAN,
Editor.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1950.

GEORGE G. SCHWENKE,
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(My commission expires March 30, 1952.)

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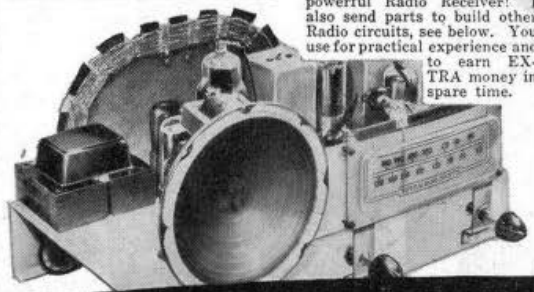

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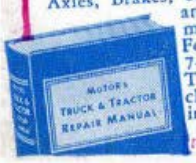

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