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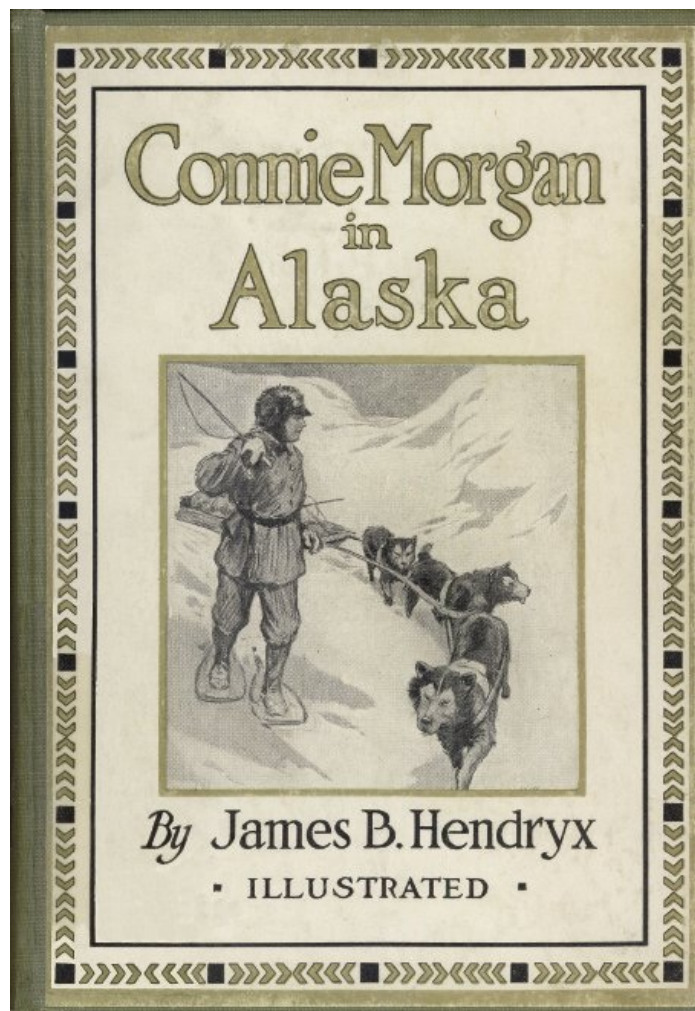
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CONNIE MORGAN IN ALASKA ***





"LIKE HIS FATHER BEFORE HIM, HE WAS ANSWERING THE
CALL OF THE GOLD"

CONNIE MORGAN IN ALASKA

BY

JAMES B. HENDRYX

AUTHOR OF

"THE PROMISE," "THE LAW OF THE WOODS," ETC.



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CHAPTER I

SAM MORGAN'S BOY

Connie Morgan, or as he is affectionately called by the big, bearded men of the Yukon, Sam Morgan's boy, now owns one of the crack dog teams of Alaska. For Connie has set his heart upon winning the great Alaska Sweepstakes—the grandest and most exciting race in all the world, a race that crowds both driver and dogs to the very last measure of endurance, sagacity, and skill.

But that is another story. For Connie also owns what is probably the most ludicrous and ill-assorted three-dog team ever assembled; and he is never so happy as when jogging slowly over the trail behind old Boris, Mutt, and Slasher.

No sourdough in his right senses would give fifty dollars for the three, but Sam Morgan's boy would gladly sacrifice his whole team of thousand-dollar dogs to save any one of them. For it was the fine courage and loyalty of this misfit team that enabled him to beat out the Ten Bow stampede and file on "One Below Discovery," next to Waseche Bill, the big sourdough who is his partner—and who loves him as Sam Morgan loved him before he crossed the Big Divide.

[2]

Sam Morgan was among those who went to Alaska in the first days of the great gold rush. Like Peg's father in the play, Sam Morgan could do anything but make money. So when the news came of gold—bright, yellow gold lying loose on the floors of creeks up among the snows of the Arctic—Sam Morgan bid his wife and boy good-bye at the door of the little cottage in a ten-carat town of a middle State and fared forth to win riches.

The man loved his wife and son with all the love of his rugged nature, and for their sakes cheerfully endured the perils and hardships of the long trails without a murmur. But in spite of his dogged persistence and unflagging toil he never made a strike. He was in the van of a dozen stampedes—stampedes that made millionaires out of some men and stark corpses out of others—but somehow his claims never panned out.

[3]

Unlucky, men called him. And his name became a byword for ill-luck throughout the length and breadth of the Northland.

"She's a Sam Morgan," men would say, as they turned in disappointment from an empty hole driven deep into frozen gravel, and would wearily hit the trail to sink other shafts in other gulches.

So Sam Morgan's luck became a proverb in the North. But Sam Morgan, himself, men loved. He was known among the meat-eaters as a man whose word was as good as other men's bonds, and his cheery smile made long trails less long. It was told in the camps that on one occasion, during a blizzard, he divided his last piece of bacon with a half-starved Indian, and then, carrying the man on his back, made eighteen miles through the storm to the shelter of a prospector's cabin.

[4]

His word became law in the settling of disputes. And to this day it is told on the trails how he followed "British Kronk," who struck it rich on the Black Horn, and abandoned his wife, leaving her starving in the cabin where she would surely have died had not Sam Morgan happened along and found her; and of how, after eight hundred miles of winter trail, he came upon him in Candle, and of the great man-fight that took place there on the hard-packed snow; of the tight clamp of the square jaw, and the terrible gleam of the grey eyes as, bare fisted, he made the huge man beg for mercy; and of how he took the man back, single-handed and without authority of law, clear to Fort Yukon, and forced him to recognize the woman and turn over to her a share of his gold.

It is not the bragging swashbucklers, the self-styled "bad men," who win the respect of the rough men upon the edges of the world. It is the silent, smiling men who stand for justice and a square deal—and who carry the courage of their convictions in their two fists.

[5]

Of these things men tell in gruff tones, to the accompaniment of hearty fist-bangs of approval. With lowered voices they tell the story of "Sam Morgan's Stumble," as the sharp elbow is called where the Ragged Falls trail bends sharply around a shoulder of naked rock, with a sheer drop of five hundred feet to the boulder-strewn floor of the creek bed. "Just Sam Morgan's luck," they whisper. "The only place on the whole hundred and fifty miles of the Ragged Falls trail where a man could come to harm—right there he steps on a piece of loose ice and stumbles head first into the canyon. He sure played in tough luck, Sam Morgan did. But he was a *man!*"

When the letters from the North ceased coming, Sam Morgan's wife sickened and died.

"Jest nach'lly pined away a-waitin' fer word from Sam," the neighbours said. And when fifteen-year-old Connie returned to the empty cottage from the bleak little cemetery on the outskirts of the village, he sat far into the night and thought things over.

[6]

In the morning he counted the few dollars he had managed to save by doing odd jobs about the village, and placing them carefully in his pocket, together with a few trinkets that had belonged to his mother, left the cottage and started in search of Sam Morgan. He locked the door and laid the

key under the mat, just where he knew his father would look for it should he return before he found him.

Connie told nobody of his plans, said no good-byes, but with a stout heart and a strange lump in his throat, passed quietly out of the familiar village and resolutely turned his face toward the great white North.

Thus it was that a small boy stepped off the last boat into Anvik that fall and mingled unnoticed among the boisterous men who crowded the shore. As the boat swung out into the current, the men left the river and entered the wide, low door of the trading post.

Dick Colton paused in his examination of the pile of freight, and noticing for the first time the forlorn little figure who stood watching the departing boat, sauntered over and spoke:

"Hello, sonny, where you bound?"

The boy turned and gravely faced the smiling man. "I've come to find my father," he answered.

"Where is your father?"

"He is here—somewhere."

"Here? In Anvik, you mean?"

"In Alaska."

The man uttered a low whistle. The smile was gone from his face, and he noted the threadbare cloth overcoat, and the bare legs showing through the ragged holes in the boy's stockings.

"What is your father's name, boy?"

"Sam Morgan."

At the name the man started and an exclamation escaped his lips.

"Do you know him?" The boy's face was eager with expectation, and the man found the steadfast gaze of the blue eyes disconcerting.

"Just you wait here, son, for a minute, while I run up to the store. Maybe some of the boys know him." And he turned and hurried toward the long, low building into which the men had disappeared.

"Boys!" he cried, bursting in on them, "there is a kid out here. Came in on the boat. He is hunting for his dad." The men ceased their talk and looked at the speaker with interest. "And, Heaven help us, it's Sam Morgan's boy!"

"Sam Morgan's boy! Sam Morgan's boy!" In all parts of the room men repeated the words and stared uneasily into each other's faces.

"He has got to be told," said Dick, with a shake of the head. "You tell him, Pete. I couldn't do it."

"Me neither. Here you, Waseche Bill, you tell him."

"I cain't do it, boys. Honest I cain't. You tell him." Thus each man urged his neighbour, and in the midst of their half-spoken sentences the door opened and the boy entered. An awkward hush fell upon them—the fifty rough, fur-clad men whose bearded faces stared at him from the gloom of the long, dark room—and the one small boy who stared back with undisguised interest. The silence became painful, and at length someone spoke:

"So you're Sam Morgan's boy?" the man asked, advancing and offering a great hairy hand. The boy took the hand and bore the pain of the mighty grip without flinching.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "Do you know him—my father?"

"Sure I know him! Do I know Sam Morgan? Well, I just guess I *do* know him! There ain't a man 'tween here an' Dawson don't know Sam Morgan!" Others crowded about and welcomed the boy with rude kindness.

"Is my father here, in Anvik?" the boy asked of the man called Pete.

"No, kid, he ain't here—in Anvik. Say, Waseche, where is Sam Morgan at? Do you know?" Thus Pete shifted the responsibility. But Waseche Bill, a long, lank Kentuckian, was equal to the occasion.

"Why, yes, Sam Mo'gan, he's up above, somewhe's," with a sweep of his arm in the direction of the headwaters of the great river.

"That's right," others added, "Sam Morgan's up above."

"When can I go to him?" asked the boy, and again the men looked at each other helplessly.

"The's a bunch of us goin' up Hesitation way in a day or two, an' yo' c'n go 'long of us. Sam's cabin's at Hesitation. But yo' cain't go 'long in that rig," he added, eyeing the threadbare overcoat and ragged stockings.

"Oh! That's all right. I'll buy some warm clothes. I've got money. Eight dollars!" exclaimed the

[7]

[8]

[9]

[10]

boy, proudly producing a worn leather pocketbook in which were a few tightly wadded bills.

Eight dollars! In Alaska! And yet not a man laughed. Waseche Bill placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled:

"Well, now, sonny, that's a right sma't lot o' money, back in the States, but it don't stack up very high in Alaska." He noticed the look of disappointment with which the boy eyed his hoard, and hastened to proceed: "But don't yo' fret none. It's lucky yo' chanced 'long heah, 'cause I happen to be owin' Sam Mo'gan a hund'ed, an' it's right handy fo' to pay it now." Hardly had he ceased speaking when Dick Colton stepped forward: [11]

"I owe Sam fifty." "An' me!" "An' me, too!" "An' me, I'd most forgot it!" The others had taken their cue, and it seemed to the bewildered boy as though these men owed his father all the money in the world.

"But I don't understand," he gasped. "Is father rich? Has he made a strike, at last?"

"No, son," answered Dick, "your father is not rich—in gold. He never made a strike. In fact, he is counted the most unlucky man in the North—in some ways." He turned his head. "But just the same, boy, there's not a man in Alaska but owes Sam Morgan more than he can pay."

"Tell me about him," cried the boy, his eyes alight. "Did my father do some great thing?" The silence was broken by old Scotty McCollough: [12]

"Na', laddie, Sam Morgan never done no great thing. He di' na' ha' to. He *was* great!" And by the emphasis which the bluff old Scotchman placed upon the word "was," of a sudden the boy knew!

"My father is dead!" he moaned, and buried his face in his hands, while the men looked on in silent sympathy. Only for a moment did the boy remain so, then the little shoulders stiffened under the thin overcoat, the hands dropped to his side and clenched, and the square jaw set firm—as Sam Morgan's had set, that day he faced big "British Kronk" on the snow-packed street of Candle. As the boy faced the men of the North, he spoke, and his voice trembled.

"I will stay in Alaska," he said, "and dig for the gold my father never found. I think he would have liked it so." Suddenly the low-ceilinged room rang with cheers and the boy was lifted bodily onto the shoulders of the big men.

"You bet, he'd liked it!" yelled the man called Pete. [13]

"Yo'r Sam Mo'gan's boy all right—jest solid grit clean through. It looks f'om heah like Sam's luck has tu'ned at last!" cried Waseche Bill.

Two days later, when he hit the long trail for Hesitation, in company with Waseche Bill, Dick Colton, and Scotty McCollough, Sam Morgan's boy was clad from *parka* hood to *mukluks* in the most approved gear of the Northland.

He learned quickly the tricks of the trail, the harnessing and handling of dogs, the choosing of camps, and the hasty preparation of meals; and in the evenings, as they sat close about the camp fire, he never tired of listening as the men told him of his father. His heart swelled with pride, and in his breast grew a great longing to follow in the footsteps of this man, and to hold the place in the affections of the big, rough men of the White Country that his father had held.

All along the trail men grasped him by the hand. He made new friends at every camp. And so it was that Sam Morgan's boy became the pride of the Yukon. [14]

At Hesitation he moved into his father's cabin, and went to work for Scotty McCollough, who was the storekeeper. Many a man went out of his way to trade with Scotty that he might boast in other camps that he knew Sam Morgan's boy.

One day Waseche Bill took him out on the Ragged Falls trail where, at the foot of the precipice, his father lay buried. The two stood long at the side of the snow-covered mound, at the head of which stood a little wooden cross with its simple legend burned deep by the men who were his friends:

SAM MORGAN ALASKA

The man laid a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder:

"Notice, son, it don't say Hesitation, nor Circle, nor Dawson—but just Alaska. It takes a mighty big man to fill that there description in this country," and the man brushed away a tear of which he was not ashamed. [15]

CHAPTER II

With the passing of the winter Connie found himself the proud possessor of a three-dog team. Shortly after the trip to "Sam Morgan's Stumble," Waseche Bill disappeared into the north on a solitary prospecting trip. Before he left he presented Connie with old Boris, a Hudson Bay dog famed in his day as the wisest trail dog on the Yukon, and in spite of his years, a lead dog whose sagacity was almost uncanny.

"He's been a great dog, son, but he's gettin' too old fo' the long trails. I aimed to keep him 'til he died, but I know yo'll use him right. Just keep old Boris in the lead and he'll learn yo' mo' trail knowledge than I could—or any otheh man." Thus Waseche Bill took leave of the boy and swung out into the trail with a younger dog in the lead. Old Boris stood with drooping tail beside his new master, and as the sled disappeared over the bank and swept out onto the ice of the river, as if in realization that for him the trail days were over, he threw back his shaggy head and with his muzzle pointing toward the aurora-shot sky, sent a long, bell-like howl of protest quavering into the chill air. [17]

Later, a passing prospector presented Connie with Mutt, a slow, heavily built dog, good-natured and clumsy, who knew only how to throw his great weight against the collar and pull until his footing gave way.

The third dog of the team was Slasher, a gaunt, untamed *malamute*, red-eyed and vicious—a throwback to the wolf. His former owner, tired of fighting him over the trails, was on the point of shooting him when Connie interceded, and offered to buy him.

"Why, son, he'd eat ye alive!" said the man; "an' if harm was to come to Sam Morgan's boy through fault of a man-eatin' wolf-dog which same he'd got off o' me, why, this here Alaska land 'ud be too small to hold me. No, son, I guess we'll jest put him out o' the way o' harmin' folks." But the boy persisted, and to the unspeakable amazement of the man, walked up and loosened the heavy leather muzzle. [18]

White fangs an inch long gleamed wickedly as the boy patted his head, but the vicious, ripping slash which the onlookers expected did not follow. The crouching dog glared furtively, with back curled lips—suspicious. Here was something he did not understand—this man-brute of small size who approached him bare-handed and without a club. So he glared red-eyed, alert for some new trick of torture. But nothing happened, and presently from the pocket of his *parka* this strange man-brute drew a piece of smoked fish which the dog accepted from his bare fingers with a lightning-like click of polished fangs, but the fingers did not jerk away in fear even though the fangs closed together a scant inch from their ends.

A piece of ham rind followed the fish and the small man-brute reached down and flung the hated muzzle far out into the snow, and with it the collar and the thong lash. [19]

The wolf-dog rose for the first time in his life unfettered. He shook himself and surveyed the astonished group of men. The stiff, coarse hair along his spine stood erect and he uttered a low throaty growl of defiance; then he turned and stalked toward the boy, planting his feet deliberately and stiffly after the manner of dogs whose temper quivers on a hair-trigger. Guns were loosened in the holsters of the men, but the boy smiled and extended his hand toward the dog, which advanced, the very personification of savage hate.

The men gasped as the pointed muzzle touched the small bared hand and a long, red tongue shot out and licked the fingers. At the sound, the dog placed himself before the boy and glared at them, and then quietly followed Connie to the corral at the rear of the log store.

"He's yours, son," exclaimed the prospector, as the boy joined them. "No, I won't take no pay for him. You saved his life, an' he b'longs to you—only be careful. Don't never take your eyes off him. I don't trust no *malamute*, let alone that there Slasher dog." [20]

With the lengthening of the days the Northland began to feel the approach of spring. Snow melted on the more exposed mountain slopes, and now and then the trails softened, so that men camped at midday.

Connie found time to take short excursions with his team up the neighbouring gulches, occasionally spending the night in the cabin of some prospector.

He was beginning to regard himself as a "sure enough sourdough" now, and could talk quite wisely of cradles and rockers, of sluices and riffles, and pay dirt and bed rock.

Then, one day when the store was full of miners and prospectors awaiting the mail, Waseche Bill burst into the room with the story of his big strike on Ten Bow. Instantly pandemonium broke loose. Men in a frenzy of excitement threw their outfits onto sleds and swung the dogs onto the ice trail of the river, struggling and fighting for place. [21]

McDougall, with his mail team of ten fast *malamutes*, bet a thousand dollars he would beat out Dutch Henry's crack Hudson Bays. Men came down from the hills and joined the stampede, and by evening a hundred dog teams were on the trail.

During the excitement, Waseche Bill sought out Connie and drew him to one side:

"Listen, son," whispered Waseche, speaking hurriedly, and to the point, "git in on this, d'yo heah? Quick now, git out yo' dogs an' hit the trail. Old Boris'll take yo' theh. The's always one mo' pull in a good dog, an' he'll unde'stand. I've been wo'kin' Ten Bow fo' six months, an' he knows the sho't-cut. Keep up yo' nerve, an' follow that dog. He'll swing off up Little Rampa't, an' the othe's

will keep to the big riveh—but it's the long way 'round. It's only 'bout eighty mile by the sho't-cut, an' a good two hund'ed by the riveh. I come down the long way so's to have a smooth trail fo' my new lead dog. The other's a rough trail, over ridges an' acrost gulches, up hill an' down, but yo' c'n make it! Boris, he'll see yo' through. An' when yo' strike Ten Bow—yo'll know it, 'cause it's the only valley that shows red rock—swing no'th 'til yo' come to a big split rock, an' theh yo'll find my stakes.

[22]

"Now, listen! My claim'll be Discovery." The man lowered his voice yet more: "An' yo' stake out One Below Discovery—*below*, mind. 'Cause she's a sho' winneh, an' togetheh we'll have the cream o' the gulch—me an' yo' will."

Many outfits passed Connie on the trail; the men laughing and joking, good-naturedly urged the boy onward. He only laughed in return, as he encouraged his ill-matched team—Big Mutt plunging against the collar, Slasher pulling wide with the long jumps of the wolf-dog, and old Boris with lowered head, in the easy lope of the born leader. Mile after mile they covered on the smooth trail of the river, and it seemed to the boy as if every outfit in Alaska had passed him in the race. But he urged the dogs onward, for the fever was in his blood—and like his father before him, he was answering the call of gold.

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Suddenly, without a moment's hesitation, old Boris swerved from the trail and headed for the narrow cleft between two towering walls of rock, which was the mouth of Little Rampart. On and on they mushed, following the creek bed which wound crookedly between its precipitous sides.

Again old Boris swerved. This time it was to head up a steep, narrow pass leading into the hills. Connie had his hands full at the gee-pole, for it was dark now—not the black darkness of the States, but the sparkling, star-lit dark of the aurora land.

He camped at midnight on a flat plateau near the top of a high divide. Morning found him again on the trail. He begrudged every minute of inaction, for well he knew the fame of McDougall's mail dogs, and Dutch Henry's Hudson Bays. It turned warmer. The snow slumped under foot, and he lost two hours at midday, waiting for the stiffening chill of the lengthening shadows.

[24]

On the third day it snowed. Not the fierce, cutting snow of the fall and winter, but large, feathery flakes, that lay soft and deep on the crust and piled up in front of the sled. That night he camped early, for both boy and dogs were weary with the trail-strain.

During the night the snow stopped falling and the wind rose, driving it into huge drifts. Progress was slow now and every foot of the trail was hard-earned. Old Boris picked his way among boulders and drifts with the wisdom of long practice. Slasher settled down to a steady pull, and Big Mutt threw himself into the collar and fairly lifted the sled through the loose snow. Toward noon they slanted into a wide valley, and the tired eyes of the boy brightened as they saw the bold outcropping of red rock. Then immediately they grew serious, and he urged the dogs to greater effort, for, far down the valley, dotting the white expanse of snow, were many moving black specks.

[25]

Old Boris turned toward the north, and the boy saw the huge split rock a mile away. He was travelling ahead of the dogs now, throwing his weight onto the *babiche* rope, his wide snowshoes breaking the trail. In spite of his efforts the pace was dishearteningly slow. Every few minutes he glanced back, and each time the black specks appeared larger and more distinct. He could make out men and sleds, and he knew by the long string of dogs that the first outfit was McDougall's.

"Hi! Hi! Mush you! Mush you!" faintly the sound was borne to his ears, and he knew that McDougall was gaining fast—he had already broken into Connie's own freshly made trail. The dogs heard it, too, and with cocked ears plunged blindly ahead.

The split rock loomed tantalizingly near, and the boy thanked his stars that he had prepared his stakes beforehand. He loosened them from the back of the sled and, ax in hand, ploughed ahead through the loose snow. His racket struck something hard and he pitched forward—it was one of Waseche Bill's stakes.

[26]

Feverishly he scrambled to his feet and drove in his own stakes, following Waseche's directions. With a final blow of his ax, he turned to face McDougall, who stared at him wide-eyed.

"You dang little scamp!" he roared. "You dang little sourdough!" And as he staked out number Two Below Discovery, the hillsides echoed back his laughter.

Other men came. Soon the valley of the Ten Bow was staked with claims running into the forties, both above and below Discovery. But the great prize of all was One Below, and it stood marked by the stakes of Sam Morgan's boy.

That night the valley of the Ten Bow was dotted with a hundred camp fires, and the air rang with snatches of rude song and loud laughter.

[27]

Men passed from fire to fire and Connie Morgan's name was on every tongue.

"The little scamp!" men laughed; "cut straight through the hills with them old discarded dogs, an' beat us to it!" "Now, what d'ye know 'bout *that*?" "If Sam Morgan c'd lived to seen it he'd be'n the tickledest man in the world!" "Poor old Sam—looks like his luck's turned at last!"

From the surrounding gloom a man stepped into the light of a large camp-fire near which Connie Morgan was seated talking with a group of prospectors. He was a little, rat-like man, with

a pinched, weasel face and little black eyes that shone beadlike from between lashless lids.

"This Number One claim, boys, it ain't legal. It's staked by a boy. I'm a lawyer, an' I know. He's a minor, an' he can't hold no claim!" He spoke hurriedly, and eyed the men for signs of approval; then he advanced toward Connie, shaking a long, bony finger. [28]

"You ain't twenty-one," he squeaked, "an' I command you to vacate this claim in the name of the law!" From the boy's side came a low growl. There was a flash of grey in the firelight, and the wolf-dog was at the man's throat, bearing him backward into the snow.

The boy was on his feet in an instant, pulling at the dog and beating him off. Luckily for the man his throat was protected by the heavy *parka* hood, and he sustained no real damage. He arose whimpering with fright.

The other men were on their feet now, and one of them knocked the revolver from the hand of the cowering man as he aimed it at the growling Slasher.

Big McDougall stepped forward, and, grasping the man by the shoulder, spun him around with a jerk.

"Look a here, you reptile! Kin ye guess what that dog 'ud of done to ye, an' it hadn't be'n fer the kid? Well, fer my part he c'd gone ahead an' done it as it was. But, seein' he didn't, just ye listen to me! What he would done won't be a patchin' to what I *will* do to ye, if ever ye open yer head about that there claim ag'in. An' that ain't all. There's a hundred men in this gulch—good men—sourdoughs, ev'ry one—an' the kid beat us all fair an' square. An', law or no law, we're right here to see that Sam Morgan's boy *does* hold down that claim! *An' don't ye fergit it!*" [29]

CHAPTER III [30]

THE NEW CAMP

The fame of Ten Bow travelled to far reaches, and because in the gold country men are fascinated by prosperity, even though it is the prosperity of others, the shortening days brought many new faces into the mining camp of Ten Bow. Notwithstanding the fact that every square foot of the valley was staked, gaunt men, whose hollow eyes and depleted outfits spoke failure, rushed in from the hills, knowing that here cordwood must be chopped, windlasses cranked, and fires kept going, and preferring the certainty of high wages at day labour to the uncertainty of a new strike in unscarred valleys.

It was six months since Waseche Bill had burst into Scotty McCollough's store at Hesitation with the news of his great strike in the red rock valley to the southward—news that spread like wildfire through the camp and sent two hundred men over the trail in a frenzied rush for gold. [31]

It was a race long to be remembered in the Northland—the Ten Bow stampede. It is told to this day on the trails, by bearded *tillicums* amid roars of bull-throated laughter and deep man-growls of approval, how the race was won by a boy—a slight, wiry, fifteen-year-old *chechako* who, scorning the broad river trail with its hundred rushing dog teams, struck straight through the hill with a misfit three-dog outfit, and staked "One Below Discovery" under the very noses of Big McDougall and his mail team of gaunt *malamutes*, and Dutch Henry with his Hudson Bays.

From the glacier-studded seaboard to the great white death barriers beyond the Yukon, wherever men forgathered, the fame of Connie Morgan, and old Boris, Mutt, and Slasher, passed from bearded lip to bearded lip, and the rough hearts of big, trail-toughened prospectors swelled with pride at the mention of his name. Only, in the big white country, he is never called Connie Morgan, but Sam Morgan's boy; for Sam Morgan was Alaska's—big, quiet Sam Morgan, who never made a "strike," but stood for a square deal and the right of things as they are. And, as they loved Sam Morgan, these men loved Sam Morgan's boy. For it had been told in the hills how Dick Colton found him, ill-clad and ragged, forlornly watching the wheezy little Yukon steamer swing out into the stream at Anvik, whence he had come in search of his father. And how, when he learned that Sam Morgan had crossed the Big Divide, he bravely clenched his little fists, choked back the hot tears, and told the big men of the North, as he faced them there, that he would stay in Alaska and dig for the gold his father never found. [32]

The Ten Bow stampede depopulated Hesitation, and the new camp of Ten Bow sprang up in a day, two hundred miles to the southward. A camp of tents and *igloos* it was, for in the mad scramble for gold men do not stop to build substantial cabins, but improvise makeshift shelters from the bitter cold of the long nights, out of whatever material is at hand. For the Ten Bow strike came late in the season and, knowing that soon the water from the melting snows would drive them from their claims, men worked feverishly in the black-mouthed shafts that dotted the valley, and at night chopped cordwood and kept the fires blazing that thawed out the gravel for the morrow's digging. When the break-up came men abandoned the shafts and, with rude cradles and sluices, and deep gold pans, set to work on the frozen gravel of the dumps. [33]

And then it was men realized the richness of the Ten Bow strike. Not since the days of Sand Creek and the Klondike had gravel yielded such store of the precious metal. As they cleaned up

the riffles they laughed and talked wildly of wealth undreamed; for the small dumps, representing a scant sixty days' digging, panned out more gold than any man in Ten Bow had ever taken out in a year—more than most men had taken out in many years of disheartening, bone-racking toil.

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During the long days of the short summer, while the cold waters of Ten Bow rushed northward toward the Yukon, log cabins replaced the tents and *igloos*, and by the end of August Ten Bow assumed an air of stability which its prosperity warranted. Scotty McCollough freighted his goods from Hesitation and soon presided over a brand new log store, which varied in no whit nor particular from the other log stores of other camps.

Those were wonderful days for Connie Morgan. Days during which the vague, half-formed impressions of youth were recast in a rough mould by association with the bearded men who treated him as an equal. He learned their likes and dislikes, their joys and sorrows, their shortcomings and virtues, and in the learning, he came instinctively to look under the surface and gauge men by their true worth—which is so rarely the great world's measure of men. And, under the unconscious tutelage of these men, was laid the foundation for the uncompromising sense of right and justice which was to become the underlying principle of the hand-hammered character of the man who would one day help shape the destiny of Alaska, and safeguard her people from the outreaching greed of monopoly.

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Daily the boy worked shoulder to shoulder with his partner, Waseche Bill, the man who had presented him with old Boris, and whispered of the short-cut through the hills which had enabled him to beat out the Ten Bow stampede.

Now, the building of cabins is not easy work. Getting out logs, notching their ends, and rolling them into place, one above another, is a man's job. And many were the pretexts and fictions by which the men of Ten Bow contrived to relieve Connie of the heavier work in the building of his home.

"Sonny," said Big McDougall one day, loafing casually over from the adjoining claim where his own cabin was nearing completion, "swar to gudeness, my back's like to bust wi' stoopin' over yon chinkin'. C'u'dn't ye jist slip over to my place an' spell the auld mon off a bit. I'm mos' petered out." So Connie obligingly departed and, as he rammied in the moss and daubed it with mud, peered through a crack and smiled knowingly as he watched the "petered out" man heaving and straining by the side of Waseche Bill in the setting of a log. And the next day it was Dutch Henry who removed the short pipe from his mouth and called from his doorway:

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"Hey, kid! Them dawgs o' mine is gittin' plumb scan'lous fat an' lazy. Seems like ef they don't git a workin' out they'll spile on me complete. Looks like I never fin' no time to fool with 'em. Now, ef you c'd make out to take 'em down the trail today, I'd sure take it mighty kind of ye." And when Connie returned to the camp it was to find Dutch Henry helping Waseche Bill in the rope-rolling of a roof log. And so it went each day until the cabin stood complete under its dirt roof. Some one or another of the big-hearted miners, with a sly wink at Waseche Bill, invented a light job which would take the boy from the claim and then took his place, grinning happily.

[37]

But Connie Morgan understood, and because he loved these men, kept his own counsel, and the big men never knew that the small, serious-eyed boy saw through their deception.

At last the cabin was finished and the boy took a keen delight in helping his big partner in the building of the furniture. Two bunks, a table, three or four chairs, and a wash bench—rude but serviceable—were fashioned from light saplings and packing case boards, brought up from Scotty's store. In the new camps lumber is scarce, and the canny Scotchman realized a tidy sum from the sale of his empty boxes.

In the shortening days men returned to the diggings and sloshed about in the wet gravel, cleaning up as they went; for before long, the freezing of the water would compel them to throw the gravel onto dumps to be worked out the following spring.

The partners hired a man to help with the heavier work and Connie busied himself with the hundred and one odd jobs about the claims and cabin. He became a wonderful cook, and Waseche Bill, returning from the diggings, always found a hot meal of well-prepared food awaiting his ravenous appetite, while the men of other cabins returned tired and wet to growl and grumble over the cooking of their grub.

[38]

Late in September the creek froze. Blizzard after whirling blizzard followed upon the heels of a heavy snowfall, and the Northland lay white and cold in the grip of the long winter. Ten Bow was a humming hive of activity. Windlasses creaked in the thin, frosty air, to the half-muffled cries of "haul away" which floated upward from the depths of the shafts, and the hillsides rang with the stroke of axes and the long crash of falling trees. By night the red flare of a hundred fires lighted the snow for miles and seemed reflected in the aurora-shot sky; and with each added bucketful, the dumps grew larger and showed black and ugly against the white snow of the valley.

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To conform to the mining laws the partners sank a shaft on each claim, working them alternately, and the experienced eye of Waseche Bill told him that the gravel he daily shovelled into the bucket was fabulously rich in gold.

And then, one day, at a depth of ten feet, Waseche Bill's pick struck against something hard. He struck again and the steel rang loudly in the cistern-like shaft. With his shovel he scraped away the thin covering of loose gravel which was deepest where his claim joined Connie's.

That evening the boy wondered at the silence of his big partner, who devoured his beans and bacon and sourdough bread, and washed them down with great draughts of black coffee. But he spoke no word, and after supper helped Connie with the dishes and then, filling his pipe, tilted his chair against the log wall and smoked, apparently engrossed in deep thought. At the table, Connie, poring over the contents of a year-old illustrated magazine, from time to time cast furtive glances toward the man and wondered at his strange silence. After a while the boy laid the magazine aside, drew the bootjack from beneath the bunk, pulled off his small boots, and with a sleepy "good-night, pardner," rolled snugly into his blankets.

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CHAPTER IV

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PARTNERS

For a long time Waseche Bill sat tilted back against the wall. His pipe went out unheeded and remained black and cold, gripped between his clenched teeth. At length he arose and, noiselessly crossing the room, stood looking down at the tousled yellow curls that shone dully in the lamp-light at the end of the roll of blankets. Making sure that the boy slept, he began silently to assemble his trail pack. Tent, blankets, grub, and rifle he bound firmly onto the strong dog-sled, and returning to the room, slid back a loose board from its place in the floor. From the black hole beneath he withdrew a heavy buckskin pouch and, pouring the contents onto a folded paper, proceeded to divide equally the pile of small glittering particles, and the flattened black nuggets of water-worn gold. One portion he stuffed into a heavy canvas money belt which he strapped about him, the other he placed in the pouch and returned to its hiding place under the floor. He fumbled in his pocket for the stub of a lead pencil and, with a sheet of brown paper before him, sat down at the table and began laboriously to write.

[42]



"Making sure that the boy slept, he began silently to assemble his trail pack."

Waseche Bill had never written a letter, nor had he ever received one. There was no one to write to, for, during an epidemic of smallpox in a dirty, twenty-two calibre town of a river State, he had seen his mother and father placed in long, black, pine boxes, by men who worked swiftly and silently, and wore strange-looking white masks with sponges at the mouth, and terrible straight, black robes which smelled strongly, like the open door of a drug store, and he had seen the boxes carried out at night and placed on a flat dray which drove swiftly away in the direction of the treeless square of sand waste, within whose white-fenced enclosure a few cheap marble slabs gleamed whitely among many wooden ones. All this he watched from the window, tearful,

[43]

terrorized, alone, and from the same window watched the dray driven hurriedly back through the awful silence of the deserted street and stop before other houses where other black boxes were carried out by the strange, silent men dressed in their terrible motley.

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The next day other men came and took him away to the "home." That is, the men called it a "home," but it was not at all like the home he had left where there was always plenty to eat, and where mother and father, no matter how tired and worried they were, always found time to smile or romp, and in the long evenings, to tell stories. But in this new home were a matron and a superintendent, instead of mother and father, and, except on visiting days, there was rarely enough to eat, and many rules to be obeyed, and irksome work to be done that tired small bodies. And instead of smiles and romps and stories there were frowns and whippings and quick, terrifying shakings and scoldings over hard lessons. He remembered how one day he stole out through an unlocked gate and hid until dark in a weed patch, and then trudged miles and miles through the long night and in the morning found himself in the bewildering outskirts of a great city—he was not Waseche Bill then, but just Willie Antrum, a small boy, who at the age of nine faced the great world alone.

[45]

The solving of the problem of existence had left scant time for book learning, and the man regretted the fact now when he was called upon for the first time to express himself in writing. He had never examined a letter; his brief excursions into the field of literature having been confined to the recording of claim papers, and the painful spelling out of various notices, handbills, and placards, which were posted from time to time in conspicuous places about trading posts or docks. He puzzled long over how to begin, and at each word paused to tug at his long moustache, and glower helplessly and gnaw the end of his stubby pencil. At last he finished, and weighting the paper with his own new, six-bladed jackknife crossed again to the bunk and stood for a long time looking down at the sleeping boy.

[46]

"I sho' do hate to go 'way an' leave yo' li'l' pa'd," he murmured. "Feels like pullin' teeth in yere." The big fingers pressed the front of his blue flannel shirt. "But it cain't neveh be tole how Waseche Bill done helt his pa'dneh to a bad ba'gain afteh his own claim run out—an' him only a kid. Ef yo' was a man 'twould be dif'ent, but yo' ain't, an' when you' grow'd up yo' might think I tuk advantage of yo'."

"Sam Mo'gan unlucky!" he exclaimed, under his breath, "Why ef yo' was my reg'lar own boy, pa'd, I'd be the luckiest man in Alaska—if I neveh struck coleh. Unlucky, sho'!" And with a suspicious winking of the eyes, and a strange lump in his throat, Waseche Bill blew out the lamp, closed the door softly behind him, harnessed his dogs, and swung out onto the moonlit trail which gleamed white and cold between low-lying ridges of stunted spruce.

Connie Morgan awoke next morning with a feeling that all was not well. It was dark in the cabin, but his ears could detect no sound of heavy breathing from the direction of his partner's bunk. Hastily he slipped from under his blankets and lighted the tin reflector lamp. As the yellow light flooded the room the boy's heart almost stopped beating and there was a strange sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach, like that day at Anvik when the little Yukon steamer churned noisily away from the log pier. For Waseche Bill's bunk was empty and his blankets were gone, and so was the tent that had lain in a compact bale in the corner, and Waseche Bill's rifle was missing from its pegs over the window.

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Suddenly his glance was arrested by the scrap of paper upon the table, where the rays of light glinted on the backs of the polished blades. He snatched up the paper and holding it close to the light, spelled out, with difficulty, the scrawling lines:

NOTISS.

[48]

dere Pard an' to Whom it may consern

this here is to Notissfy that me W. Bill [he never could remember how to spell Waseche, and the name of Antrum had long been forgotten] has quit pardners with C. Morgan. him to hev both claims which mine aint no good no moar it havin Petered Out an sloped off into hissen. i, W. BILL done tuk wat grub i nead an 1/2 the dust which was ourn, leavin hissen into the poke which i hid as per always him noin whar its at—an also to hev the cabin an geer.

SINED an SWORE TO befor ME OKT. 3 at ten Bow camp. so long. Kep the jack nife Kid fer to rember me with. do like i tole yo an dont drink no booz nor buck faro layouts like yer daddy never done an sum day yull be like him barrin his heft which he was a big man but mebe yull gro which ef yo dont dont worry none. ive saw runty size men for now which they was *good men* like Peat Moar down to rapid City. play the game sQur an tak adviz offen Mak Doogle an Duch Henery an Scotty an D colton but not othes til yo no em wel. I aimed to see yo thru but things turnin out as they done i caint. but the boys will hand it to yo strate—thems GOOD MEN yurse troole W. bill.

[49]

The boy finished reading and, dropping his head in his folded arms, sobbed as if his heart would break.

Big McDougall was aroused in the early grey of the cold Alaska dawn by an insistent pounding upon his door.

"Come in, can't ye! D'ye want to break doon the hoose?" And as Connie Morgan burst into the

room, he sat upon the edge of his bunk and grinned sleepily.

"What's ailin' ye lad, ye look flustered?"

"Waseche's gone!" cried the boy, in a choking voice, as he thrust the paper into the great hairy hand.

"Gone?" questioned the man, and began slowly to decipher the scrawl. At length he glanced at the boy who stood impatiently by. [50]

"Weel?" the Scotchman asked.

"I want your dogs!"

The man scratched his head.

"What'll ye be up to wi' the dogs?"

"I'm going to find Waseche, of course. He's my pardner, and I'm going to stay by him!" McDougall slowly drew on his boots, and when he looked up his bearded face was expressionless.

"D'ye onderstan' that Waseche's claim's no gude? It sloped off shallow rock onto yourn, an' it's worked out a'ready. Waseche, he's gone, an' ye're full owner o' the best claim on the Ten Bow. You ain't got no pardner to divide up wi'—it's all yourn."

The boy regarded him with blazing eyes:

"What do you mean, I have no pardner? Waseche *is* my pardner, and you bet he'll find that out when I catch him! I'll stick by him no matter what he says, and if he won't come back, I won't either! Of course I've got the best claim on Ten Bow, but Waseche put me onto it, and gave me old Boris, and—" his voice broke and the words came choking between dry sobs—"and that day in Anvik he said he owed my father a hundred dollars, and the others all chipped in—I thought it was true then—but I know now—and I shut up about it because they thought I never knew! [51]

"I don't want the claim, I want Waseche! And I'll stick by him if I have to abandon the claim. Pardners are pardners! and when I catch that old *tillicum* I'll—I'll bring him back if I have to *beat him up*! My dad licked British Kronk at Candle—and British was bigger! He's *got* to come back!" The small fists were doubled and the small voice rang shrill and high with righteous indignation. Suddenly Big McDougall's hand shot out and gripped the little fist, which he wrung in a mighty grip.

"Ah, laddie, fer all yer wee size, ye're a *mon*! Run ye the noo, an' pack the sled whilst I harness the dogs. Wi' that ten-team ye'll come up wi' Waseche anent Ragged Falls Post." Twenty minutes later the boy appeared with his own dogs unleashed. [52]



"McDougall's prize *malamutes* shot out on the trail."

"Mush! Boris, find Waseche! Mush!" And the old dog, in perfect understanding, uttered a low whine of eagerness, and headed northward at a run. The next instant the boy threw himself belly-wise onto the sled and McDougall's prize *malamutes* shot out on the trail of the old lead dog, with big Mutt and the red-eyed Slasher running free in their wake.

Standing in his doorway, the Scotchman watched them dwindle in the distance, while distinctly to his ears, through the still, keen air, was borne the sharp creak of runners and the thin shouts of the boy as he urged the dogs over the hard-packed trail: [53]

"Hi! Hi! Mush-u! Mush-u! Chook-e-e-e!"

CHAPTER V

ON THE TRAIL OF WASECHE

Waseche Bill loved the North. The awful grandeur of the naked peaks towering above wooded heights, the wide sweep of snow valleys, the chill of the thin, keen air, and the mystic play of the [54]

aurora never failed to cast their magic spell over the heart of the man as he answered the call of the long white trails. And, until Connie Morgan came into his life, he had loved *only* the North.

Accustomed to disappointment—that bitter heritage of the men who seek gold—he took the trail from Ten Bow as he had many times taken other trails, and from the moment the dogs strung out at the crack of his long-lashed whip, his mind was busy with plans for the future.

"Reckon I'll pass up Ragged Falls. The's nothin' theh—Coal Creek's staked, an' Dog Creek, an' Tanatat's done wo'ked out. Reckon I'll jest drift up Eagle way an git holt of some mo' dogs an' a new outfit, an' me'be take on a pa'dner an' make a try fo' the Lillimuit." Mile after mile he covered, talking aloud to himself, as is the way of the men of the silent places, while the smooth-worn runners of the sled slipped over the well-packed trail. [55]

Overhead the sky was brilliant with the shifting, many-hued lights of the aurora borealis, which threw a weird, flickering glow over the drear landscape. It was the kind of a night Waseche loved, when the cold, hard world lay veiled in the half-light of mystery. But his mind was not upon the wild beauty of his surroundings. His heart was heavy, and a strange sense of loneliness lay like a load upon his breast. For, not until he found himself alone upon the trail, did he realize how completely his little partner had taken possession of his rough, love-starved heart. Yet, not for an instant did he regret his course in the abandonment of the claim. [56]

"It's all in a lifetime," he murmured, "an' I didn't do so bad, at that. I 'speck theh's clost to ten thousan' in my poke right now—but the boy's claim! Gee Whiz! Fust an' last it ort to clean up a million! But, 'taint leavin' all that gold in the gravel that's botherin' me. It's—it's—I reckon it's jest the boy *hisself*. Li'l ol' sourdough!

"Hayr, yo' One Ear, yo'! Quit yo' foolin'! I'm talkie' like a woman. Mush on!"

At daybreak, when he struck the wide trail of the big river, Waseche Bill halted for breakfast, fed and rested his dogs, and swung upstream on the long trail for Eagle.

McDougall's ten *malamutes* were the pride of McDougall and the envy of the Yukon. As they disappeared in the distance bearing Connie Morgan on the trail of his deserting "pardner," the big Scotchman turned and entered his cabin.

"He's a braw lad," he rumbled, as he busied himself about the stove. "To Waseche's mind the lad's but a wee lad; an' the mon done what few men w'd done when ut come to the test. But, fer a' his sma' size the lad's uncanny knowin', an' the heart o' um's the heart o' a *tillicum*. [57]

"He'll fetch Waseche back, fer he'll tak' na odds—an' a gude job ut'll be—fer, betwixt me an' mesel', the ain needs the ither as much as the ither needs the ain. 'Tis the talk o' the camp that ne'er a nicht sin' Ten Bow started has Waseche darkened the door o' Dog Head Jake's saloon, an' they aint a sourdough along the Yukon but what kens when things was different wi' Waseche Bill."

Out on the trail, Connie urged the dogs forward. Like Waseche Bill, he, too, had learned to love the great White Country, but this day he had eyes only for the long sweep of the trail and the flying feet of the *malamutes*.

"I must catch him! I've *got* to catch him!" he kept repeating to himself, as the flying sled shot along hillsides and through long stretches of stunted timber. "He'll make Ragged Falls Post tonight, and I'll make it before morning." [58]

Darkness had fallen before the long team swept out onto the Yukon. Overhead the stars winked coldly upon the broad surface of the frozen river whose snow reefs and drifts, between which wound the trail, lay like the marble waves of a sculptured ocean.

Old Boris, running free in the lead, paused at the junction of the trails, sniffed at the place where Waseche had halted early in the morning, and loped unhesitatingly up the river. The old lead dog was several hundred yards in advance of the team, and cut off from sight by the high-piled drifts; so that when Connie reached the spot he swung the *malamutes* downstream in the direction of Ragged Falls Post, never for an instant suspecting that his partner had taken the opposite trail.

For several minutes old Boris ran on with his nose to the snow, then, missing the sound of the scratching feet and the dry husk of the runners, he paused and listened with ears cocked and eyes in close scrutiny of the back trail. Surely, those were the sounds of the dog team—but why were they growing fainter in the distance? The old dog whimpered uneasily, and then, throwing back his head, gave voice to a long, bell-like cry which, floating out on the tingling air like the blast of a bugle, was borne to the ears of the boy on the flying dog sled, already a half-mile to the westward. At his sharp command, the well trained *malamutes* nearly piled up with the suddenness of their stop. The boy listened breathlessly and again it sounded—the long-drawn howl he knew so well. "Why has Boris left the trail," wondered the boy. "Had Waseche met with an accident and camped? Were the feet of his dogs sore? Was he hurt?" Connie glanced at his own two dogs, Mutt and Slasher, who, unharnessed, had followed in his wake. They, too, heard the call of their leader and had crouched in the snow, gazing backward. Quickly he swung the sled dogs and dashed back at a gallop. Passing the point where the Ten Bow trail slanted into the hills, he urged the dogs to greater effort. If something had happened and Waseche had camped, the quicker he found him [59]

[60]

the better. But, if Waseche had not camped, and old Boris was fooling him, it would mean nearly an hour lost in useless doubling. With anxious eyes he scanned the trail ahead, seeking to penetrate the gloom of the Arctic night. At length, as the sled shot from between two high-piled drifts, he made out a dark blotch in the distance, which quickly resolved itself into the figure of the old lead dog sitting upon his haunches with ears alert for the approaching sled. Connie whistled, a loud, peculiar whistle, and the old dog bounded forward with short, quick yelps of delight.

"Where is Waseche, Boris?" The boy had leaped from the sled and was mauling the rough coat playfully. "Find Waseche! Boris! Go find him!" With a sharp, joyful bark, the old dog leaped out upon the trail and the wolf-dogs followed. A mile slipped past—two miles—and no sign of Waseche! The boy called a halt. "Boris is fooling me," he muttered, with disappointment. "He couldn't have come this far and gotten back to the place I found him."

[61]

Connie had once accompanied Waseche Bill to Ragged Falls Post and when he took the trail it was with the idea that Waseche had headed for that point. Unconsciously, Scotty McDougall had strengthened the conviction when he told the boy he should overtake his partner at Ragged Falls. So now it never occurred to him that the man had taken the trail for Eagle, which lay four days to the south-east.

Disappointed in the behaviour of the old dog, upon whose sagacity he had relied, and bitterly begrudging the lost time, he whistled Boris in and tried to start him down the river. But the old dog refused to lead and continued to make short, whimpering dashes in the opposite direction. At last, the boy gave up in despair and headed the team for Ragged Falls, and Boris, with whimpered protests and drooping tail, followed beside Mutt and Slasher.

All night McDougall's *malamutes* mushed steadily over the trail, and in the grey of the morning, as they swept around a wide bend of the great river, the long, low, snow-covered roof of Ragged Falls Post, with its bare flagpole, appeared crowning a flat-topped bluff on the right bank.

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Connie's heart bounded with relief at the sight. For twenty hours he had urged the dogs over the trail with only two short intervals of rest, and now he had reached his goal—and Waseche!

"Wonder what he'll say?" smiled the tired boy. "I bet he'll be surprised to see me—and glad, too—only he'll pretend not to be. Doggone old *tillicum*! He's the best pardner a man ever had!"

Eagerly the boy swung the dogs at the steep slope that led to the top of the bluff. A thin plume of smoke was rising above the roof; there was the sound of an opening door, and a man in shirt sleeves eyed the approaching outfit sleepily. Connie recognized him as Black Jack Demaree, the storekeeper. And then the boy's heart almost stopped beating, for the gate of the log stockade that served as a dog corral stood open, and upon the packed snow before the door was no sled.

[63]

"Hello, sonny!" called the man from the doorway. "Well, dog my cats! If it ain't Sam Morgan's boy! Them's Scotty McDougall's team, ain't it?"

"Where's Waseche Bill?" asked the boy, ignoring the man's greeting.

"Waseche Bill! Why, I ain't saw Waseche sense you an' him was down las' summer." The small shoulders drooped wearily, and the small head turned away, as, choking back the tears of disappointment, the boy stared out over the river. The man looked for a moment at the dejected little figure and, stepping to his side, laid a rough, kindly hand on the boy's arm.

"Come, sonny; fust off, we'll git the dawgs unharnessed an' fed, an' then, when we git breakfas' et, we c'n make medicine." The boy shook his head.

"I can't stop," he said; "I must find Waseche."

[64]

"Now, look a here, don't you worry none 'bout Waseche. That there ol' sourdough'll take care of hisself. Why, he c'n trail through a country where a wolf w'd starve to death!

"Ye've got to eat, son. An' yer dawgs has got to eat an' rest. I see ye're in a hurry, an' I won't detain ye needless. Mind ye, they worn't no better man than Sam Morgan, yer daddy, an' he worn't above takin' advice off a friend." Without a word the boy fell to and helped the man, who was already unharnessing the dogs.

"Now, son, 'fore ye turn in fer a few winks," said Black Jack Demaree, as he gulped down the last of his coffee and filled his pipe. "Jes' loosten up an' tell me how come you an' Waseche ain't up on Ten Bow workin' yer claim?"

The man listened attentively as the boy told how his partner's claim had sloped off into his own and "petered out." And of how Waseche Bill had taken the trail in the night, so the boy would have an undivided interest in the good claim. And, also, of how, when he woke up and found his partner gone, he had borrowed McDougall's dogs and followed. And, lastly, of the way old Boris acted at the fork of the trails. When the boy finished, the man sat for several minutes puffing slowly at his short, black pipe, and watching the blue smoke curl upward. Presently he cleared his throat.

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"In the first place, sonny, ye'd ort to know'd better'n to go contrary to the ol' dawg. In this here country it's as needful to know dawgs as it is to know men. That there's a lesson ye won't soon fergit—never set up yer own guess agin' a good dawgs nose. Course, ye've got to know yer dawg. Take a rankus pup that ain't got no sense yet, an' he's li'ble to contankerate off on the wrong trail—but no one wouldn't pay no heed to him, no more'n they would to some raw shorthorn that come

a blustercatin' along with a sled load o' pyrites, expectin' to start a stampede.

"But, ye're only delayed a bit. It's plain as daylight, Waseche hit fer Eagle, an' ye'll come up with him, 'cause, chances is, he'll projec' round a bit among the boys, an' if he figgers on a trip into the hills he'll have to outfit fer it."

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"Thank you, Jack," said the boy, offering his small hand; "I'll sure remember what you told me. I think I'll take a little nap and then mush."

"That's the talk, son. Never mind unrollin' yer bed, jes' climb into my bunk, yonder. It's five days to Eagle, an' while ye're sleepin' I'll jes' run through yer outfit an' see what ye need, an' when ye wake up it'll be all packed an' ready fer ye."

When Connie opened his eyes, daylight had vanished and Black Jack sat near the stove reading a paper-backed novel by the light of a tin reflector lamp.

"What time is it?" asked the boy, as he fastened his *mukluks*.

"'Bout 'leven G.M.," grinned the man.

"Why, I've slept twelve hours!" exclaimed the boy in dismay.



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"When Connie opened his eyes, daylight had vanished."

"Well, ye needed it, er ye wouldn't of slep' it," remarked the man, philosophically.

"But, look at the *time* I've wasted. I might have been——"

"Now, listen to me, son. Yere's another thing ye've got to learn, an' that is: In this here country a man's got to keep hisself fit—an' his dawgs, too. Forcin' the trail means loosin' out in the long run. Eight or ten hours is a day's work on the trail—an' a good day. 'Course they's exceptions, like a stampede or a rush fer a doctor when a man c'n afford to take chances. But take it day in an' day out, eight or ten hours'll git ye further than eighteen or twenty."

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"It's the *chechakos* an' the tin horns that excrootiates theirselves an' their dawgs to a frazzle, an' when a storm hits 'em, er they miss a cache, it's good-night! Take an ol' sourdough an' he'll jes' sagashitate along, eat a plenty an' sleep a plenty an' do the like by his dawgs, an' when trouble comes he jes' tightens his belt a hole er two an' hits his dawgs couple extra licks fer breakfas' an' exoobertes along on his nerve.

"Eat yer supper, now, an' ye c'n hit the trail whenever ye like. Yer sled's packed fer the trip an' a couple days to spare."

"I came away in such a hurry I forgot to bring my dust," said the boy, ruefully.

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"Well, I guess ye're good fer it," laughed the man. "Wisht I had a thousan' on my books with

claims as good as yourn an' Waseche's."

After supper they harnessed the dogs and the boy turned to bid his friend good-bye. The man extended a buckskin pouch.

"Here's a poke with a couple hundred in it. Take it along. Ye mightn't need it, an' then agin ye might, an' if ye do need it, ye'll need it bad." The boy made a motion of protest.

"G'wan, it's yourn. I got it all chalked up agin ye, an' I'd have to change the figgers, an' if they's anything on earth I hate, it's to bookkeep. So long! When ye see Waseche Bill, tell him Black Jack Demaree says ye can't never tell by the size of a frog how fer he c'n jump."

CHAPTER VI

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THE MEN OF EAGLE

Waseche Bill jogged along the main street of Eagle, past log cabins, board shacks, and the deceiving two-story fronts of one-story stores. Now and then an acquaintance hailed him from the wooden sidewalk, and he recognized others he knew, among the small knots of men who stood about idly discussing the meagre news of the camp. At the Royal Palm Hotel, a long, low, log building with a false front of boards, he swung in and, passing around to the rear, turned his dogs into the stockade.

In the office, seated about the stove, were a dozen or more men, most of whom Waseche knew. They greeted him loudly as he entered, and plied him with a volley of questions.

"Where ye headed?"

"Thought ye'd struck it rich on Ten Bow?"

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"D'ye hear about Camaron Creek?"

The newcomer removed his heavy *parka* and joined the group, answering a question here, and asking one there.

"How's Sam Morgan's boy comin' on? We heard how you an' him was pardners an' had a big thing over on Ten Bow," inquired a tall man whose doleful length of sallow countenance had earned him the nickname of Fiddle Face. As he talked, this man gnawed the end of his prodigiously long mustache. Waseche's eyes lighted at the mention of the boy.

"He's the finest kid eveh was, I reckon. Sma't as a steel trap, an' they ain't nawthin' he won't tackle. C'n cook a meal o' vittles that'd make yo' mouth wateh, an' jest nach'lly handles dogs like an ol' *tillicum*."

"How come ye ain't workin' yer claim?" asked someone.

"It's this-a-way," answered Waseche, addressing the group. "Mine's Discovery, an' his'n's One Below, an' we th'ow'd in togetheh. 'Bout ten foot down, mine sloped off into his'n—run plumb out. An' I come away so's the kid'll have the claim cleah." A silence followed Waseche's simple statement—a silence punctuated by nods of approval and low-voiced mutterings of "Hard luck," and "Too bad." Fiddle Face was first to speak.

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"That's what I call a *man*!" he exclaimed, bringing his hand down on Waseche's shoulder with a resounding whack.

"Won't ye step acrost to Hank's place an' have a drink?" invited a large man, removing his feet from the fender of the big stove, and settling the fur cap more firmly upon his head.

"No thanks, Joe. Fact is, I ain't took a drink fo' quite a spell. Kind o' got out o' the notion, somehow."

"Well, sure seems funny to hear you refusin' a drink! Remember Iditarod?" The man smiled.

"Oh, sure, I recollect. An' I recollect that it ain't neveh got me nawthin' but misery an' an empty poke. But, it ain't so much that. It's—well, it's like this: Sam Mo'gan, he ain't heah no mo' to look afteh the kid, an'—yo' see, the li'l scamp, he's kind o' got it in his head that they ain't no one jest like me—kind o' thinks I really 'mount to somethin', an' what I say an' do is 'bout right. It don't stand to reason I c'n make him b'lieve 'taint no good to drink licker, an' then go ahead an' drink it myself—does it, now?"

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"Sure don't!" agreed the other heartily. "An' that's what *I* call a man!" And the whack that descended upon Waseche's shoulder out-sounded by half the whack of Fiddle Face.

After supper the men drifted out by twos and threes for their nightly rounds of the camp's tawdry places of amusement. Waseche Bill, declining their invitations, sat alone by the stove, thinking. The man was lonely. Until this night he had had no time to realize how much he missed his little partner, and his thoughts lingered over the long evenings when they talked together in the cabin, and the boy would read aloud from the illustrated magazines.

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A chair was drawn up beside his, and the man called Joe laid a large hand upon his knee.

"This here Sam Morgan's boy—does he favour Sam?" he asked.

"Like as two bullets—barrin' size," replied Waseche, without raising his eyes.

"I s'pose you talked it over with the kid 'fore you come away?" Waseche looked up.

"Why, no! I done left a lettah, an' come away while he was sleepin'."

"D'ye think he'll stand fer that?"

"I reckon he's got to. Course, it'll be kind o' hard on him, fust off, me'be. Same as me. But it's bettah fo' him in the end. Why, his claim's good fo' a million! An' the boys up to Ten Bow, they'll see him through—McDougall, an' Dutch Henry, an' the rest. They-all think as much of the boy as what I do." The big man at Waseche's side shook his head doubtfully.

"I know'd Sam Morgan well," he said, fixing the other with his eyes. "He done me a good turn onct an' he never asked no odds off'en no one. Now, if the kid's jes' like him—s'pose he follers ye?" [75]

"Cain't. He ain't got the dogs to."

The other smiled and dropped the subject.

"Where ye headin' fer, Waseche?" he asked, after a few moments of silence.

"I aim to make a try fo' the Lillimuit."

"The Lillimuit!" exclaimed Joe. "Man, be ye crazy?"

"No. They's gold theh. I seen the nuggets Sven Carlson fetched back two ye'rs ago."

"Yes! An' where's Sven Carlson now?"

"I don'no."

"An' no one else don't know, neither. He's dead—that's where he is! Leastwise, he ain't never be'n heerd from after he started back fer the Lillimuit."

"Want to go 'long?" asked Waseche, ignoring the other's statement.

"Who? Me! Not on yer life I don't—not to the Lillimuit! Not fer all the gold in the world." [76]

"Oh, I reckon 'tain't so bad as folks claim."

"Claim! Folks ain't in no shape to claim! They ain't no one ever come back, 'cept Carlson—an' he was loco, an' went in agin—an' that's the last of Carlson."

"What ails the country?" asked Waseche.

"They's talk of white Injuns, an' creeks that don't freeze, an'—well, they don't no one really know, but Carlson." The man shrugged and glanced over his shoulder. "If I was you, I'd hit the back trail. They's a plenty fer two in the Ten Bow claim an' pardners is pardners."

Waseche ignored the suggestion:

"I'll be pullin' fer the Lillimuit in the mo'nin'. Sorry ye won't jine me. I'll be rollin' in, now. Good-night."

"So long! An' good luck to ye. I sure hate to see ye go."

Early in the evening of the fourth day after Waseche Bill's departure for the unknown Lillimuit Connie Morgan swung McDougall's ten-dog team into Eagle. [77]

The boy, heeding the advice of Black Jack Demaree, had curbed his impatience and religiously held himself to a ten-hour schedule, and the result was easily apparent in the way the dogs dashed up the steep trail and swung into the well-packed street of the big camp.

In front of a wooden building marked "Post Office," he halted. A large man, just emerging from the door, stared in amusement at the tiny *parka*-clad figure that confronted him.

"Hello, son!" he called. "Where might you be headin' fer?"

"I'm hunting for Waseche Bill," the youngster replied. "Have you seen him?"

"That'll be Scotty McDougall's team," observed the man.

"Yes, but have you seen Waseche?"

"You'll be Sam Morgan's boy," the man continued.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, come on along up to the *hotel*." [78]

"Is Waseche there?" eagerly inquired the boy.

"Well, no, he ain't jes' right there, this very minute," replied the man, evasively.

"Where has he gone?" asked the boy, with a sudden fear in his heart.

"Oh, jes' siyou'd out on a little prospectin' trip. Come on, I'll give ye a hand with the dogs—supper'll be about ready."

That evening Connie Morgan found himself the centre of an interested group of miners—rough, kindly men, who welcomed him warmly, asked the news of Ten Bow, and recounted in awkward, hesitating sentences stories of his father. Before turning into the bunk assigned to him, the boy sought out the proprietor of the hotel, who sat in the centre of an interested group, discussing local politics with a man from Circle.

"I'll pay my bill now, because I want to hit the trail before breakfast," he said, producing the well-filled pouch that Black Jack Demaree had thrust into his hand. Big Jim Sontag chuckled way back in his beard as he regarded his littlest guest. [79]

"Go 'long, yo', sonny! Shove yo' poke in yo' pocket. Yo' welcome to stop undeh my roof long as yo' want to. Why, if I was to cha'ge yo' fo' boa'd an' lodgin' afteh what yo' pap done fo' me, up on Tillimik—hope the wolves'll eat me, hide an' taller!"

The man called Joe came around the stove and stood looking down at the boy.

"Look here, son, where you aimin' to hit fer so early in the mornin'?"

"Why, to find Waseche, of course!" The boy seemed surprised at the question.

"To the Lillimuit!" someone gasped, but Joe silenced him.

"Son," he said, speaking slowly, "Waseche Bill's struck out fer the Lillimuit—the country where men don't come back from. Waseche's a man—an' a good one. He knows what he's up agin', an' if he wants to take a chanct that's his business. But, jes' between us, Waseche won't come back." [80] The boy's small shoulders stiffened and his eyes flashed, as the little face uptilted to look into the man's eyes.

"If Waseche don't come back, then I don't come back either!" he exclaimed. "He's my *pardner*! I've *got* to find him!"

"That's what I call a *man*!" yelled Fiddle Face, bringing his fist down upon the table with a bang.

"Jes' the same, sonny," continued Joe, firmly, "we can't let ye go. We owes it to you, an' we owes it to Sam Morgan. They's too many a good man's bones layin' somewhere amongst them fiendish peaks an' passes, now. No, son, you c'n stay in Eagle as long as you like, an' welcome. Or, you c'n hit the trail fer Ten Bow. But you can't strike out fer the Lillimuit—*an' that goes!*" There was finality in the man's tone, and one swift glance into the faces of the others told the boy that they were of the same mind, to a man. For the first time in his life, Connie Morgan faced the opposition of men. Instinctively he knew that every man in the room was his friend, but never in his life had he felt so helplessly alone. What could one small boy do in the face of the ultimatum of these men of the North? Tears rushed to his eyes and, for a moment, threatened to overflow upon his cheeks, but, in that moment, there arose before him the face of Waseche Bill—his "pardner." The little fists clenched, the grey eyes narrowed, forcing back the hot tears, and the tiny jaw squared to the gritting of his teeth. [81]



"What could one small boy do in the face of the ultimatum of these men of the North?"

"Good-night," he said, and selecting a candle from among the many on top of the rude desk, disappeared down the dark corridor between the rows of stall-like rooms. [82]

"Jes' fo' all the wo'ld like Sam Mo'gan," drawled big Jim Sontag. "I've saw *his* eyes squinch up, an' his jaw clamp shut, that-a-way, a many a time—an' nary time but somethin' happened. We've shore got to keep an eye on that young un, 'cause he aims to give us the slip in the mo'nin'."

"Ye said somethin', then, Jim," agreed Fiddle Face, gnawing at his mustache. "The kid's got sand, an' he's game plumb through, an' when he starts somethin' he aims to finish it—which like his dad used to."

Connie Morgan, for all his tender years, knew men. He knew, when he left the group about the stove, that they would expect him to try to slip out of Eagle, and that if he waited until morning he would have no chance in the world of eluding their vigilance. Minutes counted, for he also knew that once on the trail, he need have no fear of pursuit; for no team in the Yukon country, save only Dutch Henry's Hudson Bays, could come anywhere near the trail record of McDougall's ten gaunt *malamutes*.

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Pausing only long enough in the little room with its scrawling "No. 27" painted on the door to wriggle into his *parka* and snatch his cap from the bunk, he stole cautiously down the narrow passage leading to the rear of the ell, where a small door opened directly into the stockade. With feverish haste he harnessed the dogs and opened the gate. In the shadow of the building he paused and peered anxiously up and down the street. No one was in sight and, through the heavily frosted windows of the buildings, dull squares of light threw but faint illumination upon the deserted thoroughfare.

"Mush! Mush!" he whispered, swinging the long team out onto the hard-packed snow.

As he passed a store the door opened and a man stood outlined in the patch of yellow light. Connie's heart leaped to his throat, but the man only stared in evident surprise that any one would be hitting the trail at that time of night, and then the door closed and the boy breathed again. He wished that he could stop and lay in a supply of grub, but dared not risk it. Better pay twice the price to some prospector, or trapper, than risk being stopped.

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Silently the sled glided over the smooth trail and slanted out onto the river with Boris, Mutt, and Slasher capering in its wake.

Connie had only a vague notion as to the location of the unknown Lillimuit. He knew that it lay somewhere among the unmapped headwaters of Peel River, and that he must head up the Tatonduk and cross a divide. Toward morning he halted at the mouth of a river that flowed in from the north-east. A little-used trail was faintly discernible and the boy called the old lead dog.

"Go find Waseche, Boris!" he cried, "go find him!" Notwithstanding the fact that Waseche's trail was nearly five days old, the old dog sniffed at the snow and, with a joyous yelp, headed up the smaller river.

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The next morning there was consternation in Eagle, and a half-dozen dog sleds hit the trail. About ten miles up the Tatonduk, the men of Eagle met a half-breed trapper with an empty sled.

"Any one pass ye, goin' up?" asked Joe.

The trapper grinned.

"Yeste'day," he answered, "white man papoose"; he held his hand about four feet from the snow. "Ten-dog team—Mush! Mush! Go like de wolf! Stop on my camp. Buy all de grub. Nev' min' de cost—hur' up! He try for catch white man, go by four sleeps ago." Joe cracked his whip and the dogs leaped forward.

"You no catch!" the half-breed shouted. "Papoose, him go! go! go! Try for mak' Lillimuit. Him no come back."

Disregarding the prediction of the half-breed, Joe, Fiddle Face, and big Jim Sontag continued their pursuit of the flying dog team, despite the fact that as they progressed the trail grew colder. After many days they came to the foot of the great white divide and camped beneath overcast skies, and in the morning a storm broke with unbelievable fury.

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Every man, woman, and child in eastern Alaska remembers the great blizzard that whirled out of the north on the morning of the third of December and raged unabated for four days, ceased as suddenly as it started, and then, for four days more, roared terrifically into the north again.

On the ninth day, the three men burrowed from their shelter at the foot of a perpendicular cliff. The trail was obliterated, and on every hand they were confronted by huge drifts from ten to thirty feet in height, while above them, clinging precariously to the steep side of the mountain that divided them from the dreaded unknown, were vast ridges of snow that momentarily threatened to tear loose and bury them beneath a mighty avalanche.

Silently the men stared into each other's faces, and then—silently, for none dared trust himself to speak—these big men of the North harnessed their dogs and began the laborious homeward journey with heavy hearts.

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And, at that very moment, a small boy, eighty miles beyond the impassable barrier of the snow-capped divide, tunnelled through a huge drift that sealed the mouth of an ice cavern in the side of an inland glacier, and looked out upon the bewildering tangle of gleaming peaks. Thanks to the unerring nose of old Boris, and the speed of McDougall's sled dogs, the trail of Waseche had each day become warmer, and the night before the storm, when Connie camped in the convenient ice-cavern, he judged his partner to be only a day ahead. When the storm continued day after day, he chafed at the delay, but comforted himself with the thought that Waseche must also camp.

As he stood at the mouth of his cave gazing at the unfamiliar mountains, towering range upon

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range, with their peaks glittering in the cold rays of the morning sun, old Boris crowded past him and plunged into the unbroken whiteness of the little valley. Round and round he circled with lowered head. Up and down the jagged ice wall of the glacier he ran, sniffing the snow and whining with eagerness to pick up the trail that he had followed for so many days. And as the boy watched him, a sudden fear clutched at his heart. For instead of starting off with short, joyous yelps of confidence, the old dog continued his aimless circling, and at length, as if giving up in despair, sat upon his haunches, pointed his sharp muzzle skyward, and lifted his voice in howl after quavering howl of disappointment.

"The trail is buried," groaned the boy, "and I had almost caught up with him!" He glanced hopelessly up and down the valley, realizing for the first time that the landmarks of the back trail were obliterated. His eyes narrowed and he gritted his teeth:

"I'll find him yet," he muttered. "My Dad always played in hard luck—but he never *quit!* I'll find Waseche—but, if I don't find him, the big men back there that knew Sam Morgan—they'll know Sam Morgan's boy was no quitter, either!" He turned away from the entrance and began to harness the dogs. [89]

Way down the valley, high on the surface of the glacier, Waseche Bill stopped suddenly to listen. Faint and far, a sound was borne to his ears through the thin, cold air. He jerked back his *parka* hood and strained to catch the faint echo. Again he heard it—the long, bell-like howl of a dog—and as he listened, the man's face paled, and a strange prickling sensation started at the roots of his hair and worked slowly along his spine. For this man of the North knew dogs. Even in the white fastness of the terrible Lillimuit he could not be mistaken.

"Boris! Boris!" he cried, and whirling his wolf-dogs in their tracks, dashed over the windswept surface of the glacier in the direction of the sound. [90]

"I can't be wrong! I can't be wrong!" he repeated over and over again, "I raised him from a pup!"

CHAPTER VII [91]

IN THE LILLIMUIT

Speak *desolation*. What does it mean to you? What picture rises before your eyes? A land laid waste by the ravages of war? A brain picture of sodden, trampled fields, leaning fences, grey piles of smoking ashes which are the ruins of homes, flanking a long, white, unpeopled highway strewn with litter, broken wagons, abandoned caissons, and, here and there, long fresh-heaved ridges of brown earth that cover the men who were? Isn't that the picture? And isn't it the evening of a dull grey day, just at the time when the gloom of twilight shades into the black pall of night, and way toward the edge of the world, on the indistinct horizon, a lurid red glow tints the low-hung clouds—no flames—only the dull, illusive glow that wavers and fades in the heavens above other burning homes? Yes, that is desolation. And, yet—men have been here—everything about you speaks the presence of people. Here people lived and loved and were happy; and here, also, they were heartbroken and sad. The whole picture breathes humanity—and the inhumanity of men. And, as people have lived here, instinctively you know that people will live here again; for this is man-made desolation. [92]

Only those to whom it has been given to know the Big North—the gaunt, white, silent land beyond the haunts of men—can realize the true significance of *desolation*.

Stand surrounded by range upon towering range of unmapped mountains whose clean-cut peaks show clear and sharp through the keen air—air so dry and thin that the slanting rays of the low-hung midday sun gleam whitely upon the outlines of ice crags a hundred miles away. Stand there alone, enveloped by the solitude of the land where men never lived—nor ever will live—where the silence is a *thing*, pressing closer and closer about you—smothering you—so that, instinctively, you throw out your hands to push it away that you may breathe—then you begin to know desolation—the utter desolation of the frozen wilderness, the cold, dead land of mystery. [93]

The long howl of the great grey wolf as he lopes over the hunger trail is an eerie sound; so is the cackling, insane laughter of a pack of coyotes in the night-time, and the weird scream of the *loup-cervier*; but of all sounds, the most desolate, the sound that to the ears of man spells the last word of utter solitude and desolation, is the short, quick, single bark of the Arctic fox as he pads invisible as a phantom in his haunts among the echoing rim-rocks. Amid these surroundings, brains give way. Not soften into maudlin idiocy, but explode in a frenzy of violence, so that men rush screaming before the relentless solitude; or fight foolishly and to the death against the powers of cold amid the unreal colours of the aurora borealis whose whizzing hiss roars in their ears when, at the last, they pitch forward into the frozen whiteness—bushed! [94]

This was the scene of desolation that confronted Connie Morgan as McDougall's straining

malamutes jerked the sled from the ice-cavern that had served as a shelter through all the days of the great blizzard, when the wind-lashed snow, fine as frozen fog, eddied and whirled across the surface of the glacier which towered above him, and drifted deep in the narrow pass.

The sled runners squeaked loudly in the flinty snow, and Connie halted the dogs and surveyed the forbidding landscape. Never in his life had he been so utterly alone. For twenty days he had followed the trail of Waseche Bill, and now he stood at the end of the trail—worse than that, for the high piled drifts that buried the trail of Waseche covered his own back trail, completely wiping out the one slender thread that connected him with the land of men. He stood alone in the dreaded Lillimuit! Before him rose a confusion of mountains—tier after tier of naked peaks clear and sharp against the blue sky. Fresh as he was from the great Alaska ranges, the boy was strangely awed by the vastness of it all. It was unreal. He missed the black-green of the timber belt that relieved the long sweep of his own mountains, for here, from rounded foothill to topmost pinnacle, the mountains were as bare of vegetation as floating icebergs. The very silence was unnatural and the boy's lips pressed tightly together as thoughts of Ten Bow crowded his brain: the windlass-capped shafts, the fresh dumps that showed against the white snow of the valley; the red flash and glow of the fires in the night that thawed out the gravel for the next day's digging; the rough log cabins ranged up and down the gulch in two straggling rows—he could almost hear the good-natured banter which was daily exchanged across the frozen creek bed between the rival residents of Broadway and "Fiff Avenue," as the two irregular "streets" of the camp were named. He thought of his own cabin and the long evenings with his big partner, Waseche Bill, sitting close to the roaring little "Yukon stove," puffing contentedly upon his black pipe, which he removed now and then from between his lips to judiciously comment upon the stories that the boy read from the man-thumbed, coverless magazines of other years, which had been passed from hand to hand by the big men of the frozen places.

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A lump came in his throat and he swallowed hard, and as he looked, the naked peaks blurred and swam together; and two hot, salty tears stung his eyes. At the sting of the tears the little form stiffened and the boy glanced swiftly about him as, with a mittened hand, he dashed the moisture from his eyes. The small fingers clenched hard about the handle of the long-lashed, walrus hide dog whip, and he stepped quickly to the gee-pole of the sled.

"I'm a *piker!*" he cried, "a *chechako* and a *kid* and a *tin-horn* and a *piker!* Crying like a girl because I'm homesick! *Bah!* What would Waseche say if he could see me now? And *Dad?* *There* was a *man!* Sam Morgan!" The little arms extended impulsively toward the great white peaks and the big blue eyes glowed proudly:

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"Oh, Dad! *Dad!* They call you unlucky! But I'd rather have the big men back there think of me like they talk of *you*, than to have all the gold in the world!" He leaped suddenly beyond the sled and shook a tiny clenched fist toward the glittering crags.

"I'm *not* a piker!" he cried, fiercely. "I couldn't be a piker, and be Sam Morgan's boy! I got here in spite of the men of Eagle! And I'll find Waseche, too! I'm not afraid of you! You cold, white Lillimuit—with your big, bare, frozen mountains, and your glaciers, and your stillness! You can't bluff *me!* You may *get* me—but you can't *turn* me! *I'm game!*"

As the voice of the boy thinned into the cold air, Slasher, the gaunt, red-eyed wolf-dog, that no man had ever tamed, ranged himself close at his side and, with bristling hair and bared fangs, added his rumbling, throaty growl to Connie Morgan's defiance of the North.

With a high-pitched whoop of encouragement and a loud crack of the whip, the boy swung the impatient ten-team to the westward and headed it down the canyon into the very heart of the Lillimuit. High mountains towered above him to the left, and to the right the sheer wall of the glacier formed an insurmountable barrier. The dry, hard-packed snow afforded excellent footing and McDougall's trained sled dogs made good time as they followed the lead of old Boris who, trotting in advance, unerringly picked the smoothest track between the detached masses of ice and granite that in places all but blocked the narrowing gorge, into which the trail of Waseche Bill had led on the first day of the great blizzard.

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Mile after mile they covered, and as the walls drew closer together the light dimmed, for the slanting rays of the winter sun even at midday never penetrated to the floor of the narrow canyon. As he rounded a sharp bend, Connie halted the dogs in dismay for, a short distance in front of him, the ice-wall of the glacier slanted suddenly against the granite shoulder of a high butte. Wide eyed, he stared at the barrier. He was in a blind pocket—a *cul-de-sac* of the mountains! But where was Waseche? Weary and disappointed the boy seated himself on the sled to reason it out.

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"There *must* be a way out," he argued. "I didn't camp till the snow got so thick I couldn't see, and he had to camp, too. If he doubled back I would have seen him." He started to his feet in a sudden panic. "I wonder if he did—while I slept?" Then, as his glance fell upon the dogs, he smiled. "You bet, he didn't!" he cried aloud, "not with thirteen wolf-dogs camped beside the trail. Slasher would growl and bristle up if a man came within half a mile of us, and Waseche could never get past old Boris." He remembered the words of Black Jack Demaree: "Never set up yer own guess agin' a good dog's nose." Connie Morgan was learning the North—he was trusting his dogs.

"There's a trail, somewhere," he exclaimed, "and it's up to me to find it!" He cracked his whip, but instead of leaping to the pull, the dogs crouched quivering in the snow. The ground trembled as in the throes of a mighty earthquake and the boy whirled in his tracks as the canyon reverberated to the crash of a thousand thunders. He dashed to the point where, a few minutes

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before, he had rounded the sharp angle of the trail and gasped at the sight that met his gaze. The weather-whitened ice of the glacier wall was rent and shivered in a broad, green scar, and in the canyon a mass of broken ice fifty feet high completely blocked the back trail. He was imprisoned! Not in a man-made jail of iron bars and concrete—but a veritable prison of the wilderness, whose impregnable walls of ice and granite seemed to touch the far-off sky. The boy's heart sank as he gazed upon the perpendicular wall that barred the trail. For just an instant his lip quivered and then the little shoulders stiffened and the blue eyes narrowed as they had narrowed that evening he faced the men of Eagle.

"You didn't get me, Lillimuit!" he shouted. "You'll have to shoot the other barrel!" His voice echoed hollow and thin between the gloomy walls, and he turned to the dogs. Old Boris, always in search of a trail, sniffed industriously about the base of the glacier. Big, lumbering Mutt, who in harness could out-pull any dog in the Northland, rolled about in the snow and barked foolishly in his excitement. Slasher, more wolf than dog, stood snarling his red-eyed hate in the face of the new-formed ice barrier. And McDougall's *malamutes*, wise in the ways of the snow trail, stood alert, with eyes on the face of the boy, awaiting his command.

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Forty rods ahead, where the *cul-de-sac* terminated in a great moraine, Connie could discern a tangle of scrub growth and dead timber pushed aside by the glacier. The short, three-hour day was spent, and the gloomy walls of the narrow gorge intensified the mysterious semi-darkness of the long, sub-arctic night. The boy shouted to the dogs, and the crack of his long whiplash echoed in the chasm like a pistol shot. At the foot of the moraine he unharnessed and fed the dogs, spread his robes in the shelter of a bold-faced grey rock, and unrolled his sleeping bag. He built a fire and thawed out some bannock, over which he poured the grease from the pan of sizzling bacon. Connie was hungry and he devoured his solitary meal greedily, washing it down with great gulps of steaming black coffee. After supper, surrounded by the thirteen big dogs, he made a hasty inspection of the walls of his prison. The light was dim and he realized he would have to wait until daylight before making anything like a thorough examination; nevertheless, he was unwilling to sleep until he had made at least one effort to locate the trail to the outer world.

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An hour later he crawled into his sleeping bag and lay a long time looking upward at the little stars that winked and glittered in cold, white brilliance where the narrow panel of black-blue showed between the towering walls of the canyon.

"I'll get out someday," he muttered bravely.



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"My dad would have got out, and, you bet, so will I!"

"If I can't walk out, I'll *crawl* out, or *climb* out, or *dig* out! My dad would have got out, and, you bet, so will I! *He* wasn't afraid to tackle *big* things—he was ready for 'em. What got him was a *little* thing—just a little piece of loose ice on a smooth trail—he wasn't *looking* for it—that's all. But, at that, when he pitched head first into Ragged Falls canyon that day, he died like a *man* dies

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—in the big outdoors, with the mountains, and the pine trees, and the snow! And that's the way I'll die! If I never get out of this hole, when they find me they won't find me in this sleeping bag—'cause I'll work to the end of my grub. I'll dig, and chop, and hack a way out till my grub's gone, then I'll—I'll eat Mac's dogs—and when they're gone I'll—No! By Jimminy! I *won't* eat old Boris, nor Slasher, nor Mutt—I'll—I'll *starve first!*" He reached for the flap of his sleeping bag, and as he drew it over his head there came, faint and far from the rim-rocks, the short, sharp bark of a starving fox.

CHAPTER VIII

[105]

WASECHE BILL TO THE RESCUE

When Waseche Bill sent his dogs flying over the surface of the glacier in answer to the bell-like call of old Boris, he fully expected that the end of a half-hour would find him at the dog's side. Sound carries far in the keen northern air, and the man urged his team to its utmost. As the sled runners slipped smoothly over the ice and frozen snow, his mind was filled with perplexing questions. How came old Boris into the Lillimuit? Had he deserted the boy and followed the trail of his old master?

"No, no!" muttered the man. "He wouldn't pull out on the kid, that-a-way—an', what's mo', if he had, he'd of caught up with me long befo' now."

Was it possible that the boy had taken the trail? The man's brow puckered. What was it Joe said, that night in Eagle?

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"S'pose he follers ye?"

"He couldn't of!" argued Waseche. "It's plumb onpossible, with them there three ol' dawgs. An' he'd of neveh got past Eagle—Fiddle Face, an' Joe, an' Jim Sontag, they wouldn't of let him by—not fo' to go to the Lillimuit, they wouldn't—not in a hund'ed yea's."

The dogs swerved, bringing the outfit to an abrupt halt on the brink of a yawning fissure. Waseche Bill scowled at the delay.

"Sho' some crevasse," he growled, as he peered into the depths of the great ice crack fifty feet wide, which barred his path. Suddenly his eye lighted and he swung the dogs to the southward where, a quarter of a mile away, a great white snow bridge spanned the chasm in a glittering arch. Seizing his axe, he chopped two parallel trenches in the ice close to the end of the bridge. Into these eight-inch depressions he worked the runners of the heavily loaded sled, taking care that the blunt rear end of the runners rested firmly against the vertical ends of the trenches. Uncoiling a long *babiche* line, he tied one end to the tail rope of the anchored sled and, after making the other end fast about his waist, ventured cautiously out upon the snow bridge. Foot by foot he advanced, testing its strength. The bridge was wide and thick, and evidently quite old and firm, but Waseche Bill was a man who took no foolish risks.

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Men who seek gold learn to face danger bravely—it is part of the day's work—for death dogs close upon the trail of the men of the North and must be reckoned with upon short notice. Every *tillicum* in the White Country, if he would, could tell of hairbreadth escapes, and of times when a clear brain and iron nerve alone stood between him and the Great Beyond. But of these things they rarely speak—for they know of the others, like Sam Morgan, whose work is done, and whose names are burned into the little wooden crosses that dot the white snow of Aurora Land; and whose memory remains fresh in the haunts of the sourdoughs, where their deeds are remembered long and respected when the flash bravado of the reckless tin-horn is scorned and forgotten.

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Satisfying himself that the bridge would bear the weight of the outfit, Waseche Bill untied the rope and headed the dogs across at a run.

The surface of the glacier became rougher as he advanced and Waseche was kept busy at the gee-pole as the dogs threaded their way between ice hummocks and made long detours to avoid cracks and fissures, so that the winter sun was just sinking behind the mountains when the man at last found himself upon the edge of the glacier, at a point some distance above the cave where Connie Morgan had sought shelter from the storm. He looked out over the undulating ridges of snow waste that stretched away toward a nearby spur of the mountains. Intently he scanned each nook and byway of the frozen desert, but not a moving object, not a single black dot that might by any stretch of the imagination be construed as a living thing, rewarded his careful scrutiny. Gradually his eyes focused upon the point where the mountains dipped toward the great ice field.

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"Yonde's the mouth of the canyon I headed into befo' the blizza'd. I'd bet a blue one the old dawg's trailed me in." Filling his lungs Waseche sent call after call quavering through the still, keen air, but the only answer was the hollow echoing of his own voice as it died away in the mountains. A mile to the eastward he worked his outfit into the valley, following the devious windings of a half-formed lateral moraine, and headed the dogs for the mouth of the canyon.

He searched in vain for tracks as he entered the narrow pass. The snow was smooth and untrampled as the driving wind of the blizzard had left it.

"Sho' is queeah," he muttered. "Sweah to goodness, I hea'd that Boris dawg—I'd know that howl if I hea'd it in Kingdom Come—an' I know it *now!* I wondeh," he mused, as the team followed the devious windings of the canyon, "I wondeh if this heah Lillimuit *is* a kind of spirit land like folks says. Did I really heah the ol' dawg howl, or has the big Nawth got me, too, like it done got Carlson, an' the rest? 'Cause if they was a dawg wheah's his tracks? An' if it was a ghost dawg, how could he howl?" The sled dogs paused, sniffing excitedly at the snow, and Waseche Bill leaped forward. Before the mouth of an ice-cavern were many tracks, and the man stared dumbfounded. [110]

"Fo' the love of Mike!" he cried excitedly. "It's the *kid!*" He dropped to his knees and patted affectionately the impressions of the tiny *mukluks*. "Boy! Boy! Yo' li'l ol' sourdough, yo' li'l pa'dner—How'd yo' get heah? Yo' done come, jes' as Joe 'lowed yo' would—yo' doggone li'l *tillicum!* Come all alone, too! Jes' wait 'til I catch holt of yo'—an' McDougall's dawgs! No one in Alaska could a loaned them *malamutes* offen Mac, 'cept yo'—theah's ol' Scah Foot, that lost two toes in the wolf-trap!" The man leaped to the sled and cracked his whip.

"Mush! Mush!" he cried, and the dogs bounded forward upon the trail of the boy. [111]

Waseche Bill traversed this same canyon on the day before the blizzard. He, too, had run up against the dead end, and it was while retracing his steps that he had discovered the sheep trail, by means of which he gained the surface of the glacier a mile back from the termination of the gorge. He grinned broadly as his sled shot past the foot of this trail, entirely obliterated, now, by the new-fallen snow.

"I got yo', now, *kid,*" he chuckled. "Holed up like a silveh tip 'till the sto'm blowed by, didn't yo', pa'dner? But I got yo' back ag'in, an' from now on, me an' yo' sticks togetheh. I done the wrong thing—to go' way—but yo' so plumb li'l, I fo'got yo' was a sho' nuff man."

His soliloquy was cut short by the sudden stopping of the sled as it bumped upon the heels of the "wheel" dogs, and for the next few minutes the man was busy with whip and *mukluks* straightening out the tangle of fighting animals. Dashing in the darkness between a huge granite block and the wall of the glacier, they had brought up sharply against the new-formed ice barrier that completely blocked the trail. [112]

Slashing right and left with his heavy whip, and kicking vigorously and impartially, he finally succeeded in subduing the fighting dogs and removing the tangled harness. And then he stared dumbly at the great mass of broken ice that buried the trail of the boy. In the darkness he could form no conception of the extent of the barrier. Was it a detached fragment? Or had the whole side of the glacier split away and crashed into the canyon? Before his eyes rose the picture of a small body crushed and mangled beneath thousands of tons of ice, and for the first time in his life Waseche Bill gave way to his emotions. Sinking down upon the sled he buried his face in his hands and in the darkness, surrounded by the whimpering dogs, his great shoulders heaved to the violence of his sobs.

The great mass of ice that split from the glacier's side, while presenting an unscalable face to the imprisoned boy, was by no means so formidable a barrier when approached from the opposite side. [113]

Waseche Bill was not the man to remain long inactive. After a few moments he sprang to his feet and surveyed the huge pile of ice fragments. By the feeble light of the stars he could see that the walls of the canyon towered high above the top of the mass. Tossing his dogs an armful of frozen fish, he caught up the coil of *babiche* rope and stepped to the foot of the obstruction.

"I cain't wait till mawnin'," he muttered, "I got to find out if the kid is safe. Reckon I c'n make it, but I sho' do wish they was mo' light."

It was not a difficult climb for a man used to the snow trails, and a half hour later Waseche Bill stood at the top and, with a long sigh of relief, gazed into the depths beyond the barrier.

"Thank the Lawd, it's only a slivah!" he exclaimed. "But, at that, it mout of catched him." With a kick he sent a small fragment of ice spinning into the chasm. Almost instantly, the man heard a low growl, and his eye caught the flash of an indistinct grey shape against the snow floor below him. Straight as an arrow the shape shot toward the ice wall, and Waseche Bill heard the scratching of claws upon the flinty surface, and a low, throaty growl as the shape dropped back into the snow. He laughed aloud. [114]

"Oh, yo' Slashah dawg!" he cried happily, as he proceeded to make the end of his long line fast to a projecting pinnacle.

"I'll jes' slip down an' s'prise the kid," he chuckled, "he's prob'ly rolled in by now." Taking a couple of turns about his leg with the rope, he lowered himself over the edge and slid slowly downward. Suddenly, he gripped hard and checked his descent. He was ten feet from the bottom, and something struck the rope just beneath his feet, and as it struck, he heard again the low growl, and the vicious click of fang on polished fang, and the soft thud with which the wolf-dog struck the snow.

"Hey, yo' Slashah!" he called sharply. "Go lay down! It's only me, Slashah—don't yo' know me?" For answer the dog sprang again, and the man hastily drew himself higher—for this time the long white fangs clashed together almost at his feet, and the low growl ended in a snarl as the grey body dropped back upon the snow. [115]

"Doggone yo'! Quit yo' foolin'! Git out!" cried the exasperated man, as he tightened his grip on the swaying line. And then, beneath him, the canyon seemed filled with dogs—gaunt, grey shapes that sprang, and snapped, and growled, and fell back to spring again.

"Now, what d'yo' think of that," muttered the man disgustedly, as he peered downward into green glaring eyes and slavering jaws. "Mac's dawg's, too! I'd sho' hate fo' this heah rope to break! Theh's ol' Boris!" he exclaimed, as the lead dog appeared at the edge of the snarling pack. "Hello, Boris, ol' dawg! Yo' know me—don't yo', Boris?" With a short, sharp yelp of delight, the dog dashed in and leaped toward his old master, but his activity served only to egg on the others, and they redoubled their efforts to reach the swaying man. Waseche Bill laughed:

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"Now, what d'yo' think of that! I'd sho' hate fo' this heah rope to break!"

"Taint no use. Reckon I'll have to wake up the kid." And the next moment the walls of the canyon rang with his calls for help.

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At the other end of the chasm Connie Morgan stirred uneasily and thrust his head from under the flap of his sleeping bag. He listened drowsily to the pandemonium of growls and yelps and snarls, from the midst of which came indistinctly the sound of a voice. He became suddenly wide-awake and, wriggling from the bag, caught up his dog whip and sped swiftly up the canyon.

It was no easy task for the boy to beat the excited dogs into submission, but at length they slunk away before the stinging sweep of the lash, and Waseche Bill, his hands numb from his long gripping of the rope, slid squarely into the up-reaching arms of his little partner.

"Yo' sho' saved my bacon that time, kid. Why, that theah Slashah dawg—he'd of et me alive, an' the rest w'd done likewise, onct they got sta'ted!" Waseche Bill's tongue rattled off the words with which he sought to disguise the real emotion of his heart at finding the boy he had learned to love, safe and sound in the great white wilderness. But Connie Morgan was not deceived, and he smiled happily into the rough hair of his big partner's *parka*, as the man strained him to him in a bearlike embrace.

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That night the two sat long over the camp fire at the foot of the moraine, and the heart of the man swelled with pride as the boy recounted his adventures on the trail.

"And now I've found you," concluded the boy, "I'm going to take you back. Pardners are pardners, you know—and tomorrow we'll hit for Ten Bow."

The man turned his face away and became busily engaged in arranging the robes into a bed close against the boy's sleeping bag.

"We sho' will, kid. Pa'dners *is* pa'dners, an'—me an' yo'—somehow—I cain't jes' say it—but—anyways—Why! Doggone it! Me an' yo's mo'n jes pa'dners—ain't we, kid?"

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Later, as the man burrowed deep into his robes a voice sounded drowsily from the depths of the sleeping bag:

"Waseche!"

"Huh?" questioned the man.

"Black Jack Demaree said to tell you—let's see—what was it he said? Oh, yes—he said when I found you to tell you that 'you can't tell by the size of a frog how far he can jump.'"

Waseche Bill chuckled happily to himself:

"Yo' sho' cain't," he agreed. "Black Jack's right about that—trouble is, I nevah know'd much about frawgs."

CHAPTER IX

[120]

THE WHITE DEATH

It was yet dark when Waseche Bill opened his eyes and blinked sleepily into the small face that smiled down at him in the light of the flickering fire. The rich aroma of boiling coffee and the appetizing odour of bacon roused him to his senses and he grinned happily at the words of the boy:

"Come on, pardner, grub's ready! And you better fly at it, too. 'Cause if I know anything about it, we'll sure know we've done something by the time we get the outfit out of this hole."

Waseche glanced upward where the tiny stars winked coldly between the high walls of the gloomy gorge in which Sam Morgan's boy found himself held prisoner when the huge mass of ice detached itself from the side of the glacier and crashed into the canyon.

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"Yo' sho's on the job, son—seem's if I jest got good an' asleep. What time is it?" he asked, as he crawled from beneath his robes.

"Six o'clock," answered the boy extending a cup of steaming coffee.

"Six o'clock! Sufferin' cats! Three hours till daylight—Ain't yo got no pity on the ol' man?"

"Old man, nothing!" grinned Connie over the rim of his tin cup. "But if you wait for daylight to come down into the bottom of this well, you will be an old man before you get out."

Breakfast over, the two packed the outfit and, without harnessing the dogs, pulled the sled to the foot of the barrier. Here it was unloaded and the pack made into bundles suitable for hoisting. The sled was the heaviest piece and the only one that offered a serious problem. It was decided that Connie should remain below and make the things fast, while Waseche climbed to the top and did the hoisting. A sling was rigged from a strip of old blanket, by means of which the dogs could be lifted, by passing it under their bellies and fastening it to the rope at their backs. When all was ready Waseche grasped the swaying *babiche* line, by means of which he had lowered himself the previous evening.

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"Cain't grip nothin' with mittens on," he grumbled, as he bared his hands to the intense cold. Next moment he was pulling himself jerkily upward, hand over hand, while Connie Morgan stood below and watched the indistinct outline of the man who swayed and dangled above him, for all the world like a giant spider ascending a thread of invisible web.

The rope twitched violently as the man drew himself onto the top of the barrier, and a few minutes later the regular taps of his ice axe sounded, as Waseche chopped his "heel holts" as close to the edge as safety permitted. The tapping ceased and the voice of the man rolled and reverberated between the walls of the cistern-like chasm.

"All set, kid!"

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"Haul away!" and immediately the bale containing the two sleeping bags swung clear of the snow and was drawn upward, spinning and bumping the ice wall. Other bales followed and soon there remained only the dogs and the sled. After many unsuccessful efforts to induce the wolf-dogs to submit to the unaccustomed sling, Connie hit upon the expedient of harnessing them to the sled, for even McDougall's finely trained dogs, like all *malamutes*, were wolves at heart and were trustworthy and tractable only in harness. This accomplished, they submitted readily enough and, beginning with the "wheel dogs," one at a time, Connie passed the sling about them and cast off the harness at the same time. Waseche hauled them, snarling and biting at the encircling band, up the face of the perpendicular wall. Old Boris and good-natured Mutl submitted without a growl of protest; but it was different with the untamed savage Slasher. During the whole unusual proceeding the suspicious wolf-dog had bristled and growled, and several times it was only by the narrowest margin that Connie succeeded in averting a tragedy, as Slasher leaped with flashing fangs toward a sled dog dangling helplessly from the rope's end. At last Slasher alone remained. The boy called him. He came, with hair a-bristle, stepping slowly and stiffly. His eyes glared red, and way back in his throat rumbled long, low growls.

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"Come on! You can't bluff *me*—you old grouch, you!" laughed the boy, and stooping, slipped a heavy collar about his neck. Passing a running noose about the long pointed muzzle, he secured the free end to the collar, and to make assurance doubly sure, he tied a strip torn from the old blanket tightly about the dog's jaws, affixed the sling, and gave the signal.

It was not for his own protection that the boy thus muzzled Slasher. In all the Northland he was the only person who did not fear the wild, vicious brute, for he knew that rather than harm him the *malamute* would have allowed himself to be torn in pieces. But he feared for Waseche Bill when he came to release him. Despite the fact that he had lived with Waseche for a year, the dog treated him no whit differently than he treated the veriest stranger. To one person in all the world—and only one—the wolf-dog owed allegiance, and that person was Connie Morgan—the first and only creature of the hated man tribe who had used him with fairness. [125]

Again the line was lowered and Connie, making his own line fast to the sled, grasped the loose end, seated himself in the loop of Waseche's, and gave the signal. Up, up, he rose, fending off from the wall with feet and hands. At length he reached the top and the strong arms of Waseche helped him over the edge. After a brief rest, both laid hold of the remaining line and hauled away at the sled. The pull taxed their combined strength to the utmost, but the heavy sled was up at last, and they stood free upon the top of the barrier.

Their labours had consumed the greater part of the day, and it was well after noon when they sat down to a hasty lunch of caribou *charqui* and suet. [126]

"I would never have made it!" exclaimed the boy, thoughtfully, as his eyes travelled over the perpendicular walls of the yawning chasm. "Put her there, pardner," he said, gravely extending his hand toward Waseche. The man grasped the small, mittened hand and wrung it hard:

"Sho' now! Sho' now!" he protested hastily. "Yo' mout of." But the boy noticed that Waseche turned from the place with a shudder.

The work of packing the outfit down into the canyon occupied the remainder of the day and that night they camped at the foot of the barrier, where Waseche had left his own outfit.

"Now for Ten Bow! I sure do love every log and daub of chinking in that cabin. When fellows own their own home—like we do—when they built it with their own hands, you know—a fellow gets homesick when he's away—'specially if he's all alone. Didn't you get homesick, too, pardner?"

Waseche Bill dropped the harness he was untangling, and stepping to the boy's side, laid a big hand upon the small shoulder: [127]

"Yes, kid," he answered, in a soft voice, "I be'n homesick every minute I be'n gone. An' that night—jest befo' I left, I was homesickest of all. I thought it was the squa'h thing to do—but I've learnt a heap since, that I didn't know then. Tell me, son, if yo' love the cabin so, why did yo' come away? The claim was yo'n. I wrote it out that way a purpose." The clear grey eyes of the boy looked up into the man's face.

"Why—why, after you were gone, it—it wasn't the same any more. I—I *hated* the place. Maybe it's because I'm only a boy—"

"Yes," interrupted the man, speaking slowly, as if to himself. "Yo' only a boy—jest a little boy—an' yet—" his voice became suddenly husky, and he turned away: "Folks calls Sam Mo'gan *unlucky!*" He cleared his throat loudly, and again the big hand rested on the boy's shoulder:

"Listen, kid, I've had cabins befo' now—a many a one, on big creeks an' little—an' I've come off an' left 'em all, an' neveh a onct was I homesick. But this time I was—it was diffe'nt. Shucks, kid, don't yo' see? It takes mo'n jest a cabin to make—*home*." [128]

Soon the outfits were ready for the trail.

"We sho' got dawgs enough," grinned Waseche, as he eyed the two teams; "McDougall's ten, eight of mine, an' them three of yo'n—we betteh mush, too, 'cause it takes a sight of feed fo' twenty-one dawgs. I 'lowed to run acrost meat befo' now—caribou, or moose, or sheep—but this heah Lillimuit's as cold an' dead as the outh voids that the lecture felleh was tellin' about in Dawson. I got right int'rested in the place—till I come to find out it was too fah off to botheh about, bein' located way oveh back of the sun somewheahs."

At a crack of the whip, Waseche's dogs sprang into the lead, and McDougall's *malamutes*, with Connie trotting beside them, swung in behind. There was no wind, and in the narrow canyon sounds were strangely magnified. The squeak of sled runners on the hard, dry snow sounded loud and sharp as the creak of a windlass, and, as they passed the foot of the snow-covered sheep trail, the voice of Waseche boomed and reverberated unnaturally: [129]

"Yondeh's the ol' sheep trail wheah I got out of the canyon. Neah's I c'n make out it ain't be'n used fo' mo'n a month. I tell yo' what—times is sho' hawd when the sheep pulls out of a country."

It was very cold. Toward midday the windings of the canyon allowed them occasional glimpses of the low-hung sun. It had a strange unfamiliar appearance, like a huge eye of polished brass, glaring coldly in a bright white light not its own. As each turn of the trail cut off his view, the boy glanced furtively at his partner and was quick to note the man's evident uneasiness. Mile after mile they mushed in silence. The fragmentary conversation of the earlier hours ceased, and each experienced a growing sense of exhaustion. The motionless air hung heavy and dead about them. [130]

Its vitality was wanting, so that they were forced to breathe rapidly and concentrate their minds upon the simple act of keeping up with the dogs. Each was conscious of a growing lethargy that sapped his strength. Even the dogs were affected, and plodded mechanically forward with lowered heads and drooping tails.

They were approaching the cavern in which Connie had sought refuge from the blizzard. For several miles the boy had been wondering whether Waseche would camp at the cave. He hoped that he would. He was growing terribly sleepy and it was only by constant effort that he kept his eyes open, although they had been scarcely five hours on the trail. His head felt strangely light and hollow, and white specks danced before his eyes. He closed his eyes and the specks were red. They danced in the darkness, writhing and twisting like fiery snakes. He opened his eyes and held doggedly to his place beside the team. His mind dwelt longingly upon the soft, warm feel of his sleeping bag. The boy's nerves were tense and strained, so that his lips and eyelids twitched spasmodically, with a sting as of extreme cold. [131]

As they drew nearer the mouth of the cavern he felt that he would scream aloud if Waseche did not halt. His gaze became fixed upon the broad back of his partner as he mushed beside his dogs, and he noted that the man walked with quick, jerky steps. He wondered vaguely at this, for it was not Waseche's way. This passing thought vanished, and again his mind reverted to the all-important question: would Waseche camp? He would ask him. He filled his lungs—then, suddenly the thought flashed through his brain: "I'm a *piker!* I won't ask him—I'll drop in my tracks first." The deep breath stung his lungs and he coughed—a sharp, dry cough that rasped his throat. The man turned at the sound and eyed him sharply.

"Keep yo' mouth shut! An' hurry—*hurry!*" The man's voice was low and hard, and he, too, coughed.

At the mouth of the cavern the dogs stopped of their own accord and lay down in harness. The boy noted this, and also that instead of waiting alert, with cocked ears and watchful eyes for a word of command, they lay with their pointed muzzles pressed close against the hard snow, as if fearing to move. [132]

Swiftly and silently Waseche began to remove the harness from the dogs and Connie followed his example. As soon as a dog was released, instead of rolling about and ploughing and rooting his snout into the snow, he slunk quickly into the cave. The hitches were cast loose and sleeping bags, robes, grub, and frozen fish for the dogs were carried into the cavern. Waseche made another trip into the canyon while the boy sank down upon his rolled sleeping bag and stared stupidly at the dogs huddled together in the farther end of the cave, their eyes gleaming greenly in the darkness. A quarter of an hour later the man returned with a huge armful of gnarled, grubby brushwood that he had hacked from the crevices of the rocks. Near the entrance he built a small fire, filled the coffeepot with snow, and thawed some pemmican in the frying pan. He filled his pipe, threw a handful of coffee into the pot, and turned toward Connie. The boy had fallen asleep with his back against the ice wall. Waseche shook him gently: [133]

"Wake up, son! Grub pile!" He stirred uneasily and opened his eyes.

"Let me alone," he muttered, sleepily, "I'm not hungry."

"Yo' got to eat. Heah's some hot coffee—jest climb outside of this, an' then yo' c'n sleep long as yo' like."

The hot liquid revived the boy and he ate some pemmican and bannock. Having finished, he spread his robes and unrolled his sleeping bag. Before turning in, however, he stepped to the door and looked out. He was surprised that it was yet daylight and the sun hung just above the shoulder of a sharp, naked peak. Again the white spots danced before his eyes, and he turned quickly:

"Look! Look at the sun!" he cried in a sudden panic. "One, two, three, four—look Waseche, I can't count 'em." [134]

"Come away, kid," said the man at his side, pulling at his sleeve.

"But the suns! Look! Can you count them?"

"No, kid, we cain't count 'em." The man's voice was very low.

"But what is the matter? There is only one real sun! Where do they come from?"

"I do'no, I do'no. It's—we got to camp heah till—" He was interrupted by the boy:

"It's what?" he asked, bewildered.

"It's—I neveh seen it befo'—but I've hea'd tell—It's the *white death*. Heah, in the Lillimuit, an' some otheh places—nawth of the Endicotts, some say. Tonight—the flashin' lights, an' the blood-red aurora—tomorrow, a thousan' suns in the sky. They ain't no wind, an' the air is dead—dead, an' so cold yo' lungs'll crackle an' split if yo'r caught on the trail. We got to keep out of it, an' then —" His voice trailed into silence.

"And then *what?*" asked the boy, drowsily. [135]

"I do'no, I do'no, kid—that depends."

Connie Morgan was awakened by the whimpering of dogs. In his ears was a strange sound like the hiss of escaping steam. He wondered, drowsily, how long he had slept, and lay for some moments trying to collect his senses. The sounds in the night terrified him—filled him with an unnamed dread. The strange hissing was not continuous, but broken and interrupted by a roaring crackle, like the sound of a burning forest. But there was no forest—only ice and snow, and the glittering peaks of ranges. With a trembling hand he raised the hood of his sleeping bag and peered cautiously out. To the boy's distorted imagination the whole world seemed on fire. The interior of the cave glowed dimly with a dull red light, while beyond the entrance the snow flashed brilliant lights of scarlet.

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Connie Morgan "stared spellbound at the terrible splendour of the changing lights."

"Don't get scairt, son. It's only the aurora. It's like they said—Carlson, an' one or two mo' I've hea'd talk. The blood-red aurora in the night time, an' the thousan' suns in the day." Waseche's sleeping bag was close against his own, and the sound of his voice reassured the terrified boy. Together, in silence, they watched the awful spectacle. Red lights—scarlet, crimson, vermilion flashed upon the snow, and among the far-off peaks which stood out distinctly above the farther wall of the long stretch of canyon that their viewpoint commanded. Upon the green ice at the entrance to the cavern the lights showed violet and purple. The boy stared spellbound at the terrible splendour of the changing lights, while above the hiss and crackle of the aurora he could hear the whimpering and moaning of the terrified dogs. He shrank back into his sleeping bag, pulling the flap tight to keep out the awful sights and sounds, and lay for hours waiting for something to happen. But nothing did happen and when he awoke again it was day. The dogs had ceased to whine, and Waseche Bill was moving about in the cave. The man had hung a robe over the entrance, but around the edges Connie could see narrow strips of light. The air was oppressive and heavy. His head ached. The acrid smell of smoke permeated the interior of the cavern and Connie wriggled from his sleeping bag and, while Waseche busied himself with the coffee and bacon, he broke out a bale of fish for the dogs.

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"Cut 'em down to half ration, son," warned the man, eyeing the scanty supply. "We got to get out of this heah Lillimuit—an' we got to get out on what we got with us. I don't reckon they's a livin' critteh in the whole blame country, 'cept us, an' we got to go easy on the grub."

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"I heard a fox bark the other night," ventured the boy.

"Yo' won't get fat on fox bahks," grinned the man, "an' that's all the clost yo' even get to 'em. Outside of white goats, them foxes is about the hah'dest vahmint to get a shot at they is."

"Aren't we going to hit the trail?" asked the boy in evident surprise, when, after breakfast, instead of packing the outfit, Waseche lighted his pipe and stretched out on a robe.

"Not *this* day, we ain't," replied the man; "An' me'be not tomorrow—if the wind don't come. Do yo' know how fah we'd get today?"

"How far?"

"I do'no—a hund'ed steps, me'be—me'be half a mile—'twouldn't be fah."

"Tell me what's the matter, Waseche. What's going to happen? And why have you closed up the door?"

"It's the *white death*," answered the man in an awed tone. "Nothin' won't happen if we stay inside. I've hea'd it spoke of, only I somehow—I neveh believed it befo'. As fo' the robe—hold yo' breath an' peek out through that crack along the aide. Hold yo' breath, mind—*don't breathe that air!*"

[139]

Connie filled his lungs and drew back the edge of the robe. Instantly his face seemed seared by the points of a million red-hot needles. He scarcely noticed the pain, for he was gazing in awestruck wonder where a thousand suns seemed dancing in the cloudless sky. As upon the previous day, the air was filled with dancing white specks, and the suns glared with a glassy, yellow brightness. They looked wet and shiny, but their light seemed no brighter than the light of

a single sun. No blue sky was visible, and the mountain peaks, even the nearer ones, were nowhere to be seen. The whole world seemed enveloped in a thick haze of sickly yellow.

He let go the edge of the robe and drew back from the opening.

"Gee whiz! but it's cold," he exclaimed, rubbing his stinging cheeks. "How cold is it, pardner?" [140]
For answer Waseche shifted his position, reached swiftly beneath the bottom of the robe, and withdrew from the outside a small spirit thermometer which he held up for the boy's inspection. It was frozen solid!

CHAPTER X

 [141]

THE IGLOO IN THE SNOW

"Now, kid," said Waseche Bill the following morning, "we got to make tracks fo' the Tatonduk. We got too many dogs, an' we got to cut down on the feed. I hate to do it—on the trail—but they's no two ways about it. Three or fo' days ort to put us at the divide. I made a *cache* the'h comin' in an' we'll be all right when we strike it."

The two stood in front of the cavern, breathing deeply of the clear, pure air. A stiff breeze was blowing from the south-west, and the day was warm and pleasant. The sun had not yet risen, and as the dogs swung into the trail Connie glanced at the little thermometer lashed firmly to the back of his sled. It registered twenty degrees below zero, an ideal temperature for trail travel and the boy cracked his whip and yelled aloud in the very joy of living. [142]

At the mouth of the canyon they swerved in a north-westerly direction, toward the northernmost reach of the Ogilvie Range. All day they mushed across the wide caribou barrens and flat tundra that separated the great nameless range behind them from the high mountains to the westward that lay between them and Alaska. For, upon ascending the Tatonduk, they had passed out of Alaska into the unmapped Yukon district of sub-arctic Canada. Evening of the second day found them among the foothills of the mountains. Patches of stunted timber appeared and the lay of the land forced them to keep to the winding beds of frozen creeks and rivers. The end of the next day found them camped on the snow-covered ice of a small river. Waseche divided the few remaining fish, threw half of them to the dogs, and sat down beside the boy, who had prepared a meal of caribou *charqui* and coffee:

"Seems like this *must* be the creek—but I ain't sho'. I thought the one we tackled yeste'day was it, too—but it petered out on us." [143]

"I don't know," replied Connie, "I thought I'd remember the back trail, but since the big snow everything looks different. And I was in an awful hurry to catch up with you, besides."

"Sho', kid, I know. I'd ort to took mo' pains myself, but I wasn't so pa'ticlah about gettin' back—then. Anyways, we'll try this one. We got to watch the grub now, fo' sho'. Them *malamutes* is hongry! Day afteh tomorrow, if we don't find the *cache*, we'll have to kill a dawg." Connie nodded.

"We'll find it, all right. This looks like the creek. Still, so do they all," he added reflectively.

The next day was a repetition of the day preceding. They followed the bed of the creek to its source in a narrow canyon which lost itself upon the steep side of a gigantic mountain. Wearily, they retraced their steps and once again among the foothills, turned to the northward.

"They's no dodgin' the truth, son," said Waseche gloomily, as they mushed on, scrutinizing the mouths of creeks in a vain endeavour to locate a landmark. "We're lost—jest na'chly plumb *lost*—like a couple of *chechakos*." [144]

"The divide's *somewhere*," answered the boy, bravely. "We'll find it."

"Yes, it's somewhe'h. But how many thousan' of these creeks, all jest alike, do yo' reckon they is? An' how about grub?"

"I hate to kill a dog," the boy said.

"So do I, but the rest has got to eat. I know them wolf-dawgs; onct they get good an' hongry they'll begin tearin' one another up—then they'll lay fo' *us*—folks is meat, too, yo' know."

Night overtook them on a small wooded plateau and they camped in the shelter of a dense thicket of larch and stunted spruce. At the very edge of the thicket was a low white mound, its crown rising some three or four feet above the surrounding level. The sleds were drawn up at the foot of this mound, the dogs unharnessed, and, unslinging his axe, Waseche Bill went to the thicket for firewood, leaving Connie to unpack the outfit. The boy noted as he spread the robes that the mound was singularly regular, about twelve feet in diameter at the base and having evenly rounded sides—entirely different from the irregular ridges and spurs of the foothills. [145]

"You're a funny little foothill," he murmured, "way off by yourself. You look lonesome. Maybe you're lost, too—in the big, white Lillimuit."

Waseche returned with the wood and lighted the fire while Connie tossed the last of the fish to the dogs. Supper was finished in silence, the fire replenished, and the two partners lay back on the robes and watched the little red sparks shower upward from among the crackling flames.

"We ain't the first that's camped heah," remarked Waseche, between noisy puffs at his pipe. "Yondeh in the thicket is stubs wheah fiahwood's be'n chopped—an' one place wheah consid'able poles has be'n cut. The axe mawks is weatheh-checked, showin' they was cut green. But it wasn't done this yeah—an' me'be not last." [146]

"I wonder who it was? And what became of them? What did they want with poles?"

"Built a *cache*, me'be—mout of be'n a sled—but mo'n likely a *cache*. We'll projec' around a bit in the mo'nin'. Me'be we c'n find out who they was, an' wheah they was headin'. Me'be they'll be a trail map to some *cache* befo' this or to the divide."

"I hope we will find a *cache*. Then we wouldn't have to kill a dog."

Waseche's brow puckered judicially:

"Yes—we would. Yo' see, son, it's like this: We got mo' dawgs than is needful fo' a two-man outfit. If we was down to six dawgs, or even seven, an' one sled, an' they was weak or stahvin, then we could bust a fish *cache*—but to feed twenty-one dawgs—that ain't right. Likewise with ouah own grub—a man's supposed to take from anotheh man's *cache* jest so much as is needful fo' life; that is, what will get him to the neahest camp—not an ounce mo'. This is the unwritten law of the Nawth. An' a good law. Men's lives is staked on a *cache*—an' that's why when, onct in a while, a man's caught robbin' a *cache*—takin' mo'n what's needful fo' life, they ain't much time wasted. He gets—what's comin' to him." [147]

The dogs had licked up the last crumbs of their scant ration and, burrowing into the snow, wrapped themselves snugly in their thick, bushy tails. Old Boris and Slasher dug their beds in the side of the mound near where Connie had spread his robes. The boy watched them idly as they threw the hard, dry snow behind them in volleys, and long after the other dogs had curled up for the night, the sound of old Boris' claws rasping at the flinty snow could be heard at the fireside.

"Boris is diggin' *some bed!*" exclaimed the boy, as he glanced toward the tunnel from which emerged spurts of sand-like snow.

"He ain't diggin' no bed," answered Waseche. "He smells somethin'." Even as he spoke the snow ceased to fly, and seemingly from the depths of the earth, came the sound of a muffled bark. Instantly Slasher was on his feet growling and snarling into the tunnel from which the voice of old Boris could be heard in a perfect bedlam of barking. [148]

"Oh! It's a cave! A cave!" cried Connie, pushing aside the growling wolf-dog. "Maybe it's the *cache!*"

Waseche Bill finished twisting a spruce twig torch. He shook his head dubiously:

"Come heah, Boris!" he called, sharply, "come out of that!" The old dog appeared, barking joyously over his discovery. Waseche Bill lighted his torch at the fire, and pushing it before him, wriggled into the opening. After what, to the waiting boy, seemed an age, the man's head appeared at the entrance, and he pulled himself clear.

"What is it?" inquired the impatient boy. "What did you find?"

The man regarded him gravely for a moment, and then answered, speaking slowly:

[149]



"Waseche Bill attacked the hard-packed snow with his axe."

"It's an *igloo*, son—an *igloo* buried in the snow. An' the'h's a man in the'h."

"A *man*!" cried the astonished boy.

"Yes, kid—it's Carlson. He's *dead*."

Tired as they were after a hard day on the trail, the two partners were unwilling to sleep without first making a thorough examination of the buried *igloo*. More firewood was cut, and by the light of the leaping flames Waseche Bill attacked the hard-packed snow with his axe, while Connie busied himself in removing the cakes and loose snow from the excavation. At the end of an hour a squared passageway was completed and the two entered the *igloo*. [150]

"He had a plenty grub, anyways," remarked Waseche, as he cast an appraising eye over the various bags of provisions piled upon the snow floor. "He didn't stahve, an' it wasn't the red death (smallpox)—I looked pa'tic'lah, fo' I went out of heah."

Connie glanced at the body which lay partially covered by a pile of robes. The man's features were calm and composed—one could have fancied him asleep, had it not been for the marble whiteness of the skin. One by one, they examined all the dead man's effects; the little Yukon stove, half filled with ashes, the bags of provisions, his "war-bag"—all were carefully scrutinized, but not a map—not even a pencil mark rewarded their search. [151]

"He's met up with Eskimos, somewhe'h," said Waseche, examining a rudely shaped copper pan in which a bit of wicking made from frayed canvas protruded from a quantity of frozen blubber grease.

Finally the two turned to the body. The coarse woollen shirt was open at the throat, and about the man's neck, they noticed for the first time, was a thin caribou skin thong. Cutting the thong Waseche removed from beneath the shirt a flat pouch of oiled canvas. Connie lighted the wick in the copper pan and together the two sat upon a robe and, in the guttering flare of the smoky lamp, carefully unwrapped the canvas cover. The packet contained only a battered pocket notebook, upon whose worn leaves appeared a few rough sketches and many penciled words.

"Yo' read it, kid. I ain't no hand to read much," said Waseche, handing the book to Connie, and his eyes glowed with admiration as the boy read glibly from the tattered pages. [152]

"Tu'n to the last page an' wo'k back," suggested Waseche.

"January tenth—" began Connie. "Why, that was nearly a year ago! He couldn't have been dead a year!" His eyes rested on the white face of Carlson.

"A yeah, or a hund'ed yeahs—it's all the same. He's froze solid as stone, an' he'll stay like that

till the end of time," replied the man, gravely.

"It says," continued the boy, "'Growing weaker. For two days no fire. Too weak. Pain gone, but cannot breathe. To-day'—That's all, it ends there."

"Noomony," laconically remarked Waseche. The preceding pages were devoted almost entirely to a record of the progress of the disease. The first notation was January third. Under the date of January fifth he wrote:

"I am afraid my time has come. If so, tell Pete Mateese the claims are staked on Ignatook—mine and his. See map in lining of *parka*. Maybe Pete is dead. He has been gone a year. He tried to go out by the Tatonduk. I can't find him. I can't find the divide. The Lillimuit has got me! They said it would—but the gold! It is here—gold, gold, gold—yellow gold—and it is all mine—mine and Pete Mateese's. But the steam! The stillness! The white, frozen forest—and the creeks that don't freeze! After Pete left *things* came in the night. It is cold—yet my brain is on fire! I can't sleep!"

[153]

This proved to be the longest entry; the man seemed to grow rapidly weaker. When the boy finished Waseche Bill shuddered.

"The Lillimuit got him," he said slowly. "He went *marihuana*." On the next page, under the date of January sixth, the boy read:



"We'ah lost, kid. It's a cinch we cain't find the divide."

in time!"

"Made a *cache* here in timber. Growing weaker. Tomorrow I will turn back. Mapped the back trail. *2 caches*—then the claims on Ignatook, the creek of the stinking steam. I will go out by the Kandik. I mapped that trail. It is shorter, but I must find Pete Mateese. I must tell him—the claims."

[154]

"Who is Pete Mateese? And where is Ignatook?" inquired the boy.

"Sea'ch me!" exclaimed Waseche. "I ain't neveh hea'd tell of eitheh one, an' I be'n in Alaska goin' on fo'teen yeah."

For an hour they studied Carlson's map, which they found as he had directed, concealed in the lining of his *parka*. Finally Waseche Bill looked up:

"We'ah lost, kid. It's a cinch we cain't find the divide if Carlson couldn't—he know'd the country. The thing fo' us to do is to follow Carlson's map to his camp, an' then on out by the Kandik. Neah's I c'n make out, it means about three or fo' hund'ed miles of trail—but we got to tackle it. Tomorrow we'll rest an' hunt up the *cache*—Carlson's past needin' it now. We sho' got hea'h jest

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CHAPTER XI

[156]

ON THE DEAD MAN'S LONELY TRAIL

Connie Morgan pushed aside the flap of his sleeping bag and blinked sleepily into the blue-gray Arctic dawn. Far to the north-west, the thin rays of the belated winter sun pinked the edges of the ice god's chiselled peaks where the great white range guarded grimly the secrets of the man-fared Lillimuit.

The boy closed his eyes and pressed his face close against the warm fleece. Was it all a dream, he wondered vaguely—the crashing wall of the canyon—the trail of the white death—the blazing aurora—the search for the Tatonduk pass—the buried *igloo*, and the man who died? Were these things real? Or, was he still following the trail of Waseche Bill, with the unknown Lillimuit before him, and the men of Eagle behind?

Again his eyes opened and he chuckled aloud as he thought of the man called Joe, and Fiddle Face, and big Jim Sontag, and the others in the hotel at Eagle. It was not a dream. There, by the fire, was Waseche, the coffeepot was boiling with a low bubbly sound, and beyond was the round-topped *igloo*, its white side scarred by the sled-blocked entrance to the tunnel.

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"What's so funny?" grinned Waseche as, frying pan in hand, he turned at the sound of the boy's laughter. "This heah mess we ah into ain't no joke, fah's I c'n see. Whateveh yo' laughin' at, anyhow?"

The boy wriggled from his sleeping bag and joined the man by the fireside, where the preparation of breakfast was well under way.

"Oh, nothing—I was just wondering what they thought, next morning—the men back in Eagle, who wouldn't let me come to you."

"Me'be it w'd be'n betteh if yo' hadn't of," answered the man, with a glance toward the towering

snow peaks.

"Well, it *wouldn't!*" flashed the boy; "and, you bet, it would take more than just saying so to hold me back! You know you're glad I came—Anyway, I *did* come, and I'd rather be *lost* here, with you, than own the best claim on Ten Bow, and go it alone. You and I are going to beat the Lillimuit, pardner, and even Carlson couldn't do that!" [158]

"No, he couldn't," agreed the man, eyeing the boy proudly. "An' theh's plenty othehs, too, that's tried it. Some come back—but, mostly, they didn't. Carlson, in theh—he was a *man*—he died huntin' up his pahdneh. I wondeh how much of a strike they made oveh on this heah Ignatook?"

"It must be something *big*. The notebook said there was lots and lots of gold—"

"Yeh—an' it said they was creeks that don't freeze—an' frozen fohests—an' things that come in the night—an' steam. Yo' see, kid, Carlson was too long alone. It's boun' to get a man—the big, white country is—if he stays too long from his kind. It gets 'em with its flashin', hiss'n' lights, an' the roah of shiftin' ice—but, most of all, with its silence—the dead, awful stillness of the land of frozen things. It gets 'em in heah"—he pointed significantly to his forehead. "Somethin' goes wrong, sometimes all of a sudden—sometimes gradual—but, it's all the same—they might betteh died." [159]

"But, come on, let's eat, an' then hunt up Carlson's *cache*. I sho' hope he was all theah when he made that map, 'cause, if he wasn't, yo' an' me is in fo' a hahd winteh. Rampsin' th'ough the Lillimuit followin' a crazy man's map ain't no Sunday school picnic—not what yo' c'n notice—an' when we-all come to the end of the trail, we'll know we be'n somewheahs."

The *cache* was easily located near the centre of the thicket. It was a rude crotch and pole affair, elevated beyond reach of prowling animals. A couple of blows from Waseche's axe brought the structure crashing into the snow, and they proceeded to cut the lashings of the caribou skins that served as tarpaulins.

"Theah's meat a plenty wheah he come from. Look at them quahte's of caribou, an' the hides." [160]

"He didn't need to go to so much trouble with his *cache*. There is nothing here to bother it."

"How about the foxes—an' wolves, too? Wheah theah's caribou theah's wolves. An' how about his dawgs?"

"That's so!" exclaimed Connie. "I wonder what became of the dogs? And where is his sled?"

"Sled's undeh the snow, somewheahs—dawgs, too, me'be—'less they pulled out. It's owin' to what kind they was. *Malamutes* would of tu'ned wolf, an' when they found they couldn't bust the *cache*, they'd of hit out fo' the caribou heahd. Hudson Bays an' Mackenzie Riveh dawgs w'd done sim'lah, only they'd stahved to death tryin' it. An' mongrels, they'd of jest humped up an' died wheah they happen' to be standin'."

In addition to several saddles of caribou venison, the *cache* contained coffee, flour, salt, a small bottle of saccharin, and three bags of fish for the dogs. Bound securely to the coffee bag was a rough map of the trail to the preceding *cache*, which Carlson had numbered 2, and they lost no time in comparing it with the notebook which Connie produced from his pocket. [161]

"He wasn't plumb loco, anyhow," remarked Waseche, with a deep breath of relief. "His maps checks up all right, an' a crazy man couldn't make two maps hit out the same to save him, I don't reckon. Anyhow, I'm glad we found this otheh one. Neah's I c'n make out, it's three days to the next *cache*, an' me'be the'll be anotheh map to check up with."

The remainder of the forenoon was spent in packing the supplies to the camp, and at noon the two made a prodigious dinner of fresh caribou venison, thawed out and broiled over the smokeless larch coals.

"The dawgs is ga'nted up some consid'ble, s'pose we jest feed twict today. They be'n on half ration since we-all left the canyon. 'Tain't good policy to feed *malamutes* twict, an' if we don't hit it out right to the next *cache*, we'll wisht we hadn't, but, somehow, findin' that last map kind of clinched it with me. Whad'yo say, pahdneh?" [162]

Connie glanced at the brutes lying about in the snow apparently uninterested in the saddles of venison and bags of fish piled near the camp fire. Only Mutt, the huge mongrel "wheel dog" of Connie's own team, whimpered and sniffed at the newly found food, for Mutt lacked the stoicism of the native dogs of the North, who knew that feed time was hours away. The boy regarded them with judicious eye and pondered his partner's proposition gravely.

"Well, we might try it, just this once. They *do* look a little gaunt and ribby," and the boy smiled broadly as he broke out a bag of fish; for the same thought had been in his own mind for an hour and he had been just on the point of broaching it to Waseche, at the risk of being thought a chicken-hearted *chetchako*.

Connie returned to the fire as the dogs gnawed and snarled at their unexpected meal. There was plenty of coffee, now, and while the boy tossed the grounds onto the snow and refilled the pot, Waseche Bill whittled a pipe of tobacco, and stretched lazily upon his robe in the warmth of the crackling flames. [163]

"We-all must bury him decent," he began, with a nod toward the *igloo*, as they sipped at the

black coffee. "An' we must rememb' that name, Pete Mateese, the man he was huntin' fo'. If he's alive, he'd like to know. He was his pa'dneh, I reckon. Seems like, from what the book says, he neveh know'd about the strike." The man's eyes roved for a moment over the distant peaks, and he continued: "It's too bad we cain't dig no reg'lar grave fo' him, but it would take a good week to thaw out the ground, an' them fish ain't goin' to hold out only to the next *cache*. But I know anotheh way that's good, heah. The rock wall yondeh shades the *igloo* so it won't neveh melt; leastwise, it ain't apt to. Las' summeh's sun neveh fazed it 'cept to sog it down all the mo' solid. We'll give him a coffin of ice, an' his *igloo* fo' a tomb of snow. I'd a heap sooneh have it that-a-way than like them ol' king of Egyp's, that's buried in the stone pyramids out on the aidge of the desert, somewheahs. I seen one, onct, in the dime museum in Chicago. Ferry O'Tolliveh, his name was, I recollect, an' the man that run the place give a consid'able lecture about him. Seems like he was embalmed, they call it, which means he was spiced an' all wrapped up in, I think he said it was a mile an' three-quahtehs of bandages, anyhow, they was a raft of 'em, 'cause I counted mo'n a hund'ed layehs of cloth wheah they'd cut th'ough to get to his face. Which it must of be'n a heap of wo'k without they put him in a lathe; anyways, theah he was, afteh bein' dead mo'n two thousan' yeahs!

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"The man said how the embalmin' of them ol' Egyp' undehtakehs is a lost aht, an' I reckon, afteh takin' a look at Mr. Ferry O'Tolliveh, fo'ks is glad it is. He looked like the bottom row of a kit of herring. The man said his mummy was theah, too, but I didn't stop fo' to look at her—I seen all I wanted of the O'Tollivehs from lookin' at Ferry, but him bein' the only king I eveh seen, I'm glad I done it, even if he hadn't kep' well.

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"Now, with Carlson, heah, it will be diffe'nt. He'll be jest the same two thousan' yeahs from now as he is today, an' was the day he died. Ice is ice, an' if it don't melt it'll stay ice till the crack of doom."

The two set about the work with a will. The provisions were carried outside, the dead man's effects ranged about the base of the circular wall, and his robes spread in the centre of the igloo upon the hard-packed floor of snow. The body was wrapped in its blankets and laid upon the robes, and Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill gazed for the last time upon the face of Carlson, the intrepid man of the North who, like hundreds of others, lured by the call of gold, braved the unknown terrors of the silent land to pass for ever from the haunts of man. There was that in the strong, clean-cut features of the bearded face to make them pause. Here was a *man*! A man who, in the very strength and force of him, pushed beyond the barriers, defied the frozen desert, and from her ice-locked bosom tore the secret of the great white wilderness; and then, in the bigness of his heart, turned his back upon the goal of his heart's desire and faced death calmly in vain search for his absent partner.

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"The boy's lips moved in prayer, the only one he had ever learned."

Instinctively, the small boy removed his cap and dropped to his knees beside the dead man, and opposite him, awkwardly, reverently, with bared head, knelt Waseche Bill. The boy's lips moved and in the cold, dead gloom of the snow *igloo*, his voice rang high and thin in the words of the only prayer he had ever learned:

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"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
"Amen."

"Amen," repeated Waseche Bill huskily, and together they left the *igloo*.

Blocks were cut from the surface of the hard crusted snow and packed closely about the body. Snow was melted at the fire and the blocks soaked with water, which froze almost instantly, cementing the whole into a solid mass of opaque ice. In the same manner, the *igloo* was sealed, and the body of Carlson was protected both from the fangs of prowling beasts and the ravages of time. From the trunk of a young spruce, Waseche Bill fashioned a rude cross, into which Connie burned deep the name:

SVEN CARLSON
DIED JAN. 10-19—.

The cross was planted firmly and, having completed the task to their satisfaction, the two ate supper in silence and sought their sleeping bags.

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Dogs were harnessed next morning by the little light of the stars, and long before the first faint streak of the late winter dawn greyed the north-east, the outfit swung onto the trail—the year-old trail of Carlson, the man who found gold.

Before passing from sight around a point of the spruce thicket, they halted the sleds for a last look at the solitary *igloo*. There, in the shifting glow of the paling aurora, the little cross stood out sharp and black against its unending background of dead white snow, and below it showed the rounded outline of the low mound that was the fitting sepulchre of this man of the North.

CHAPTER XII

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IN THE HEART OF THE SILENT LAND

Waseche Bill and his little partner followed blindly the directions upon Carlson's map, which led them across snow as trackless and unscarred as the day it fell.

"Fr. C 3 N 3d. to FLAT MT. C 2 on rock-ledge at flagpole," read the directions on the map found in the *cache*, which was the exact reverse of the directions in the notebook which read: "Fr. FLAT MT. C 2. S 3d. to C 3. in spruce grove at *igloo*." The man had carefully mapped his trail as he proceeded, and then reversed the notes for the benefit of any chance backtrailer.

So far, the trail of Carlson was but a projection of their own trail in search of the Tatonduk divide, and for two days they mushed steadily northward, skirting the great range that lay to the westward. To the north-east and east, as far as the eye could reach, stretched vast level snow barrens, and to the southward rolled the low-lying foothills toward the glacier-studded range which was still visible, its jagged peaks flashing blue-white in the distance. Hour after hour they threaded in and out among the foothills, avoiding the deeper ravines, and with tail rope and gee pole working the outfit across coulees.

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Toward evening of the third day, both Connie and Waseche scanned the range eagerly for a glimpse of the flat mountain, but the early winter darkness settled about them without the sight of a mountain that could, by any stretch of imagination, be called "flat."

"Prob'ly we-all ah mushin' sloweh than what he done," ventured Waseche, as he peered into the gloom from the top of a rounded hill. "I hate to camp, an' I hate to mush on an' pass the landmahk in the dahk. It's mo' or less guesswo'k, followin' a cold trail. Landmahks change some, an' even if they don't, the time of yeah makes a diffe'nce, an' then, things looks diffe'nt to one man from what they look to anotheh. Likewise, things looks diffe'nt nights, than daytimes. Of co'se, a flat mountain couldn't hahdly look like nothin' else but a flat mountain nohow, but yo' cain't tell—"

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"I'm sure we haven't passed it," interrupted the boy.

"No, we ain't *passed* it. What's pestehin' me is, did Carlson know whetheh he mushed three days or ten? An' whetheh he c'd tell a flat mountain from a peaked one? I've saw fog hang so that eveh' mountain yo' seen looked flat—cut right squah acrost in the middle."

"Let's mush on for a couple of hours. There is light enough to see the mountains, and we might as well be lost one place as another." The man grinned at the philosophical suggestion.

"All right, kid. Keep yo' eyes peeled, an' when yo' get enough jest yelp an' we 'll camp."

Hour after hour they pushed northward among the little hills. The sled runners slipped smoothly over the hard, dry snow, and overhead a million stars glittered in cold brilliance against the blue-black pall of the night sky. And in all the vast solitude of the great white world the only living things were the fur-clad man and boy and the shaggy-coated dogs that drew the sleds steadily northward. Gradually it grew lighter and the stars paled before the increasing glow of the aurora. Broad banners flashed and waned in the heavens, and thin streamers of changing lights writhed and twisted sinuously, illuminating the drear landscape with a dull, uncanny light in which objects appeared strangely distorted and unreal.

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Was it possible that other eyes had looked upon these cold, dead mountains? That other feet had trodden the snows of this forsaken world-waste? It seemed to the tired boy that they had passed the uttermost reach of men, and gazed for the first time upon a new and lifeless land.

They eased out of a ravine on a long slant, and at the top Connie halted McDougall's *malamutes* and waited for Waseche Bill, whose sled had nosed deep into the soft snow of a huge drift. The man wrenched it free and urged on his dogs, which humped to the pull and clawed their way to the top, sending little showers of flinty snow rustling into the ravine. As the boy started the big ten-team, the light grew suddenly brighter. The whole North seemed bathed in a weird, greenish glow. Directly before him a broad banner flashed and blazed, and in the bright flare of light, upon the very edge of the vast frozen plain, loomed a great white mountain whose top seemed sheared by a single stroke of a giant sword! The boy's heart leaped with joy.

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"The flat mountain! It's here! It's here!" he cried, and up over the rim of the ravine rushed Waseche Bill, and in silence they gazed upon the welcome sight until the light disappeared in a final blaze of glory—and it was night.

Cache number two was easily located upon a shelf of rock before which a wind-whipped piece of cloth fluttered dejectedly at the top of a sapling firmly embedded in the snow. In spite of the increased confidence in Carlson's map, it was not without some trepidation that the partners set out the following day upon the second lap of the dead man's lonely trail. [174]

"Fr. FLAT MT. C 2. DUE E 4d C 1 STONE CAIRN RT. BANK FORK OF RIV. FOL. RIV. N-E." were the directions upon the trail map pinned with a sliver to a caribou haunch. It had been well enough to skirt the great mountain range beyond which, to the westward, lay Alaska. It was quite another thing, however, to turn their backs upon this range and strike due east across the vast snow-covered plain which stretched, far as the eye could reach, as level as the surface of a frozen sea. For four days they must mush eastward across this white expanse, without so much as a hill or a thicket to guide—must hold, by compass alone, a course so true that it would bring them, at the end of four days, to a certain solitary rock cairn at the fork of an unnamed river. Even the hardened old *tillicum*, Waseche Bill, hesitated as the dogs stood harnessed, awaiting the word of command, and glanced questioningly into the upturned face of the small boy: [175]

"It's a long shot, son, what do yo' say?" His answer was the thin whine of the boy's long-lashed dog whip that ended in a vicious crack at the ears of McDougall's leaders:

"Mush-u, mush-u, hi!" and the boy whirled the long ten-team away from the mountains, straight into the heart of the Lillimuit.

The crust of the snow that lay deep over the frozen muskeg and tundra was ideal for sled-travel and, of course, rendered unnecessary the use of snowshoes. All day long the steel-blue, cold fog hung in the north, obliterating the line of the flat horizon. The bitter wind that whipped and tore out of the Arctic died down at nightfall and, for the first time in their lives, the two felt the awful depression of the real Arctic silence. Mountain men, these, used to the mighty uproar of frost-tortured nature. The silence they knew was punctuated by the long crash of snow cornices as they tore loose from mountain crags and plunged into deep valleys to the roar of a riven forest; by the sudden boom of exploding trees; and the wild bellowing of lake ice, split from shore to wooded shore in the mighty grip of the frost king. [176]

But here, on the frozen muskeg, was no sound—only the dead, unearthly silence that pressed upon them like an all-pervading *thing*. Closer and closer it pressed, until their lungs breathed, not air—but *silence*—the dreaded, surcharged silence of the void—the uncanny silence that has caused strong men to leap, screaming and shrieking, upon it and, bare-handed, seek to wring its awful secrets from its heart—and then to fall back upon the snow and maunder and laugh at the blood stains where the claw-like nails have bitten deep into their palms—but they feel no pain and gloat foolishly—for to their poor, tortured brains this blood is the heart's blood of the Silence of the North.

On the fourth day the ground rose slightly from the low level of the muskeg. All day they traversed long, low hills—which were not hills at all, but the roll of the barren ground, and in the evening came upon the bank of the river, but whether above or below the fork they could not tell. [177]

"We'll follow it down—nawthwahd—fo' that's what the map says, an' if we do miss the *cache*, we'll strike the Ignatook camp in two mo' days. We got grub enough if a stawm don't hit us. I sho' am glad we-all didn't get caught out yondeh." The man's eyes swept the wide expanse of barrens that lay between them and the distant peaks. "It's a good hund'ed an' fifty mile acrost them flats—we sho' was lucky!"

The ice-locked river upon which they found themselves was a stream of considerable size which flowed north, with a decided trend to the eastward. The muskeg and tundra had given place to the rocky formation of the barren lands which cropped out upon the banks of the river in rock reefs and ledges. Scrub trees and bushes in sickly patches fringed the banks, their leafless branches rattling in the wind. [178]

An hour's travel on the snow-covered ice of the river brought them to a sharp bend where a river flowed in from the eastward, and there, almost at the confluence of the two streams, stood the solitary rock cairn, a monument some seven feet in height and five feet in diameter at its base.

"He didn't *cache* no great sight of meat heah," observed Waseche as, one by one, they removed the stones of the cairn. "We got a plenty, but I counted on this fo' the dawgs." Even as he spoke, they came upon a flat stone midway of the pile, which required their combined strength to displace. With a harsh, grating sound it slid sidewise into the snow, disclosing a considerable cavity, in the centre of which lay, not the expected *cache* of caribou meat, but a human skull, whose fleshless jaws grinned into their startled faces in sardonic mockery. Beside the skull lay a leaf torn from Carlson's notebook, and in Carlson's handwriting the words:

FOL. RIV. 2d N to CREEK OF STEAM. FOL. UP CREEK 2m. CAMP W BANK IN OLD MINE TUNNEL. DISCOVERY 100ft. E. TUNNEL MOUTH. 1 ABOVE CLAIM—STAKED FOR PETE MATEESE. LOOK OUT FOR WHITE INJUNS. [179]

"Ol' mine tunnel! White Injuns!" exclaimed Waseche. "I tell yo' what, son: so fah, Carlson's maps

has hit out, but when he begins writin' about white Injuns an' ol' mine tunnels, an' *cachin'* skull bones, 'stead of meat! It's jest as I tol' yo'! We-all got to keep on now, but I sho' wisht we'd neveh found Carlson an' his crazy maps."

"Whose skull do you suppose it is? And why did he *cache* it, I wonder?" asked Connie, as he handled gingerly the gruesome object.

"Seahch me!" said the man, glancing at the weather blackened skull. "Come on, le's mush."

As they advanced the surface of the surrounding land became more broken and the river descended rapidly in a series of falls, enclosed by the freezing spray, in huge irregular masses of green-hued ice, which impeded their progress and taxed to the utmost the skill of the drivers and the tricks of the trail-wise dogs in preventing the sleds from being dashed to pieces upon the slope of the ice domes, from whose hollow interiors came the muffled roar of the plunging falls. [180]

The dogs were again on half ration, and even this was a serious drain upon the supply of meat. The walls of the river became higher until, on the second day, they were threading a veritable canyon. At noon the light dimmed suddenly, and the two gazed in surprise at the sun which glowed with a sickly, vapoury glare, while all about them the air was filled with tiny glittering frost flakes, which lay thick and fluffy under their feet and collected in diamond flashing clusters on the rocks and bushes of the canyon walls.

"It's snowing!" cried Connie, excitedly. "Snowing at forty below!"

"'Tain't snow, son. It's frozen fog, an' I cain't sense it. I c'n see how it might thick up an' snow, even at forty below, but fog! Doggone it! It takes wahm weatheh to *make* fog—*an' it ain't wahm!*" [181]

Toggleing the lead dogs, they selected a spot where the wall of the canyon was riven by the deep gash of a small feeder and climbed laboriously to the top for a better view of the puzzling phenomenon.

Scarcely a quarter of a mile ahead a great bank of fog ascended, rolling and twisting toward the heavens. Slowly it rose from out of the snow, spreading into the motionless air like a giant mushroom of glittering diamond points which danced merrily earthward, converting the whole landscape into a mystic tinsel world. Far to the westward the bank extended, winding and twisting like some great living monster.

"It's the creek of the steam!" cried Waseche Bill. "It's theah wheah Carlson's camp is." But, so entranced was the boy with the weird beauty of the scene, that he scarcely heard. He pointed excitedly toward a low hill whose sides were wooded with the scrub timber of the country, where each stunted tree, each limb and spiney leaf curved gracefully under its weight of flashing rime. Towers, battlements, and spires glinted in the brilliant splendour, for, out of the direct line of the fog bank that hung above the course of the narrow creek, the sun shone as clear and bright as the low-hung winter sun of the sub-Arctic ever does shine, and its slanting rays flashed sharply from a billion tiny facets. [182]

"It's the frozen forest that he wrote about!" exclaimed the delighted boy. "It's the most beautiful thing in the world! Now, aren't you glad you came?" But Waseche Bill shook his head dubiously, and began the descent to the canyon.

"Why! Where are the dogs!" cried the boy, who was first upon the surface of the river. Waseche hurried to his side; sure enough, neither dogs nor sleds were in sight and the man leaped forward to examine the thick carpet of rime. [183]



"The two partners stared open-mouthed at the apparition. *The face was white!*"

"It's Injuns!" he announced. "Nine or ten of 'em, an' they headed nawth!" And, even as he spoke, a grotesquely feathered, beaver-topped head appeared above a frost-coated rock, almost at his elbow, and the two partners stared open-mouthed at the apparition. *The face was white!*

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CHAPTER XIII

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O'BRIEN

Surprise held Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill spellbound as they stood ankle-deep in the glittering frost spicules that carpeted the surface of the ice-locked river, and gazed speechless into the face that stared at them over the top of the rime-crusting rock.

The spell broke. From behind other rocks appeared other faces surmounted by odd beaver-skin caps, edged with the feathers of the blue, and snow goose, and of the great white Arctic owl. The partners glanced from one to the other of these strange, silent faces that regarded them through wide-set, in-slanting eyes. The faces were white—or rather, through the winter's accumulation of grease and blubber soot, they showed a light brownish yellow that, in comparison with the faces of other Indians, would easily pass for white. And they were so nearly alike that a stranger would have been at his wits' end to have distinguished one from another—all except the first one, the man whose face appeared so suddenly almost at Waseche Bill's side. He was taller than the others, his nose longer and thinner, and his whole lower face was concealed behind a luxurious growth of flaming red whiskers, while through the soot and grease his skin showed ruddy, rather than yellow, and his small, deep-set eyes were of a peculiar greenish hue.

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"Japs an' Irish!" exclaimed Waseche Bill. "Carlson was right—even to his frozen fohest an' white Injuns!"

He addressed the company with a comprehensive wave of his arm:

"Good evenin', gents. How they comin'?"

His words were greeted with stony-faced stares as meaningless and void of expression as the stare of a frozen fish. Waseche tried again:

"It's a right smaht spell o' weatheh we're havin', ain't it? An' how's all the folks? Don't all talk to

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onct, now, till I get through welcomin' yo' into me an' the kid's midst—oah else tellin' yo' how glad we-all ah to find ouhselves amongst yo'—owin' to who's givin' the pahty." He glanced from face to face, but, as before, all were stolid as graven images. Suddenly he turned upon the bewhiskered one of the green eyes:

"Hey, yo' red chinchilly! Cain't yo' talk none? An' cain't yo' yelleh perils, heah, ondehstand no language? I cain't talk no laundry, myself, but besides American, I'm some fluent in Chinook, Metlakat', Tlinkit, an' Athapascan. As fo' yo', yo' look to me like the Tipperary section of a Patrick's Day parade! Come on, now—loosen up! If yo' an' Injun, so'm I—only I've done moulted my feathehs, an' washed my face since the Fo'th of July!"

Directly addressed, the man stepped from behind his rock, and the lid of the left green eye dropped in a decided wink. The others immediately followed, crowding close about the newcomers. Squat, full-bodied men, they were, fur-clad from top to toe, and all armed with short, copper-tipped harpoons which they leaned upon as they stared. Waseche grinned into their wide, flat faces, as he of the red whiskers elbowed to the fore and spoke in a singsong voice with a decided Hibernian accent:

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"Which me name's O'Brien," he began, "an' ut's both sorry an' glad Oi am to see ye. But, phwere's th' shtampede?" He glanced anxiously up the river.

"What stampede?" asked Waseche, in surprise.

"Phy, th' shtampede! Th' shtampede to th' Ignatook, th' creek yondher—th' creek that biles."

"Sea'ch me! Me an' the kid's all theah is—an' yo' wouldn't hahdly call us a stampede."

"But, Car-rlson! An' th' breed, Pete Mateese! Didn't they nayther wan git t'rough? Ilse, how'd ye come to be follyin' th' back thrail?" The man's anxiety increased, and he waited impatiently for an answer.

"No. Carlson didn't get through. We come onto his last camp about ten days back. He died huntin' the Tatonduk divide. But, how come yo'-all to be heah? Who's yo' friends? An' wheah's ouh outfit?"

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"Hivin hilp th' bunch av us!" wailed the Irishman. "No shtampede, afther all—an' we'll all be dead befor we live to git out av this!" The man gazed far out into the gathering gloom, wringing his hands and muttering to himself. Suddenly his eyes lighted, and he questioned the two eagerly:

"D'yez know about Flor-ridy?" he asked, "phwere they say a man kin be war-rum? An' how many quar-rts av nuggits w'd ut take f'r th' car-r-fare, an' to buy, me'be ut's a bit av a tobaccy shtorre on th' sunny soide av th' shtrate, wid a bit av a gar-rdin behint, an' a pig in his pin in th' yar-rud?"

"An', shpykin' av tobaccy, hav' yez a bit to shpare? Ut's niver a shmoke Oi've had in goin' on six year—an' kin ye lind me th' loan av a match?"

Waseche tossed the man his tobacco and eyed him sharply as he lighted the short, black cutty pipe that he produced from a pocket of his thick caribou-hide shirt.

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"They've took th' outfit to th' village," O'Brien said. "But, about Flor-ridy, now——"

"We'll talk that oveh lateh. Let's be mushin', I don't want them sleds too fah in th' lead."

"Sur-re, they'll not be far-r. 'Tis ondy ar-round th' bind av th' r-river." He spoke a few harsh, guttural syllables to one of the fur-clad men, who wore across his shoulders the skin of a beautiful black fox.

"'Tis a foine language, ain't ut? An' to think Oi've hur-rd no other f'r six years past!"

"What do yo' call it?" asked Waseche, as they followed in the wake of the natives, who had started northward at the Irishman's words.

"Call ut! How sh'uld Oi know? Oi c'd be ar-rested in an-ny town in Oirland f'r phwat Oi've called ut! But, Oi've got used to ut, now—same as th' raw fish, an' blubber. How man-ny cans av nuggits did ye say? Wan quar-rt tomatty cans, wid a rid label, haypin' full—an' is ut raylly hot in Flor-ridy, or ondy middlin' war-rum, loike Kildare in th' summer?"

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"Florida's hot," ventured Connie. "I learned about it in school. And there's oranges, and alligators that eat you when you go in swimming."

"Shwimmin'! Sur-re, Oi ain't bin shwimmin' in, Oi don't know phwin. Phy, Oi ain't seen me *hide* in six years!"

They proceeded a short distance, with O'Brien muttering and chuckling in the rear, and upon rounding a sharp bend, came in sight of the village, a group of some fifteen or twenty snow *igloos*, situated upon a plateau or terrace overlooking the river. In front of an *igloo* somewhat larger than the others, stood the dog-teams with their loaded sleds surrounded by a crowd of figures that differed in no single particular from the dozen or so who mushed along in advance. Old Boris, Mutt, and Slasher, the three unharnessed dogs that had accompanied Connie and Waseche to the top of the high plateau from which they had obtained the view of the creek of the steam and the white forest, now trotted close to the heels of the boy.

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"I don't quite like the looks of things, kid," whispered Waseche, as they approached the trail that slanted upward to the village. "O'Brien's touched a little in his uppeh stohy, but he may be smaht enough in some things. He ain't wild-eyed, an' me'be he'll be all right now. I reckon he's jest be'n thinkin' of them wahm countries till he's a bit off. We got to keep ouh eyes peeled an' get out of this heah fix the best way we can. Me'be the Irishman'll help, an' me'be he'll hindeh. These heah Jap-faced Injuns don't appeah to be much hostyle, an' we betteh lay low an' get the hang of things fo' a couple of days befo' we go makin' any break."

"We'll take *him* with us," said Connie. "Just think of a white man living up here for six years!"

"We sho' will!" agreed Waseche. "I hope them heathens ain't cleaned out Carlson's camp. Raw fish an' blubber don't sound good to me—theah's some things a man don't *want* to get use' to. Heah we ah; we got to hold ouh nehve, an' keep ouh eyes open."

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"How man-ny cans av nuggits did ye say?" interrupted O'Brien, as he overtook them at the rise of the trail. "They're heavy."

"Why, they're all men!" exclaimed Connie, as they reached the spot where the entire village stood grouped about the sleds.

"Indade, an' they ain't!" refuted O'Brien. "They's fifty-seven av um all towld, incloodin' mesilf, an' th' half av us is wimmin—onldy ye can't tell th' difference nayther in looks nor-r dhress. An' a homlier-r, mor-re ill-favour-red crew niver wuz let be born, bein', near-r as Oi kin figger, half Injun, half Eskimo, an' half Chinee—an' they'll ate an-nything they kin chaw!"

At the approach of the white men, the Indians drew back, forming a wide circle about the dog-teams. Into this circle stepped a very old man, who leaned heavily upon the shaft of his harpoon and blinked his watery, red-rimmed eyes. From the corners of his mouth long tufts of white hair grew downward until they extended below the angle of his jaw. These tufts, stiff with grease, gleamed whitely like the ivory tusks of a walrus. With a palsied arm he motioned to O'Brien, who stepped before him and spoke rapidly for several moments in the guttural jargon he had used on the river. The old man answered and, as he talked, his tongue clicked oddly against his teeth, which were worn to the level of his gums.

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"What ails grandpa?" asked Waseche, when the old man had finished. "Was he sayin' somethin,' oah jest exehcisin' his mouth?"

"Sur-re, that's Metlutak, the owld chayfe; he's give over his job mostly to Annunduk, yondher, wid th' black fox shawl, but on mathers av impoortance th' owld wan has his say."

"I didn't get the drift of his ahgument—I neveh leahnt no blue jay."

"He says," began O'Brien, with a broad grin, "he says ye're welcome into the thribe. He'll set th' young min buildin' an *igloo*, an' he's glad ye've got so man-ny dogs fr 'tis two moons befor th' caribou move, an' th' fresh mayte will tasht good afther a winther av fish an' blubber."

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"With a palsied arm he motioned to O'Brien, who stepped before him."

"Meat!" exclaimed Connie, with flashing eyes. "Does he think he's going to eat those dogs?"

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"Ye don't see no dogs in th' village, do yez? An' nayther they ain't bin except th' six they shtole off Car-rlson an' Pete Mateese—an' they was into th' bilin' pot befoor they quit kickin'."

"Well, you can tell him he don't get any of these dogs to eat! And if any one lays a hand on a dog, I'll—I'll knock his block off!"

"Now, hold on, son," cautioned Waseche Bill, with his hand upon the boy's shoulder. "We got to kind of take it easy. This heah ain't no time fo' an uprisin' of the whites—the odds ain't right." He turned to the Irishman:

"O'Brien, yo' want to get out of this heah country, don't yo'?"

"Sur-re, an' Oi do!" eagerly exclaimed the man. "But, ut's six years Oi've throied ut, an' nar-ry a wanst hav' Oi done ut. Av ye kin make ut, Oi'm wid yez—but, av we don't save th' dogs, we'll niver do ut. They're good thrailers, th' punkin faced ejits, an' they've br-rung me back twinty-wan toimes, be th' clock. Car-rlson an' Pete Mateese had dogs, an' they got away."

[197]

"We-all can make it! Don't yo' worry none. I be'n in tight fixes befo'. Jest yo' listen to me, an' stall the ol' boy off fo' a day oah two. That'll give us a chanst to make medicine." O'Brien turned to the old walrus-faced shaman and there followed a half-hour of lively conversation, at the end of which the man reported to Waseche:

"They're gr-great hands fr to hav' dances, ut's par-rt av their haythen religion—that is, they call um dances, an' ut shtar-rts in that way—but ut woinds up loike a Donnybrook fair. 'Tis gr-rand fun—wid har-rpoon shafts cr-rackin' down on heads loike quarther-staves; fr barrin' pick handles, wan av thim har-rpoons is th' besht club, nixt to a black thor-rn shelala, fr a foight amongst frinds, an-ny day in th' wake.

"Oi towld um th' dogs wuz skin-poor fr-rom th' long thrail, an' not fit fr to ate, but a couple av days wid plinty av fish in their bellies, would fat um up loike a young seal.

"We'll have a big *potlatch*,' says he. 'We've more fish thin we nayde. Feed up th' dogs,' says he, 'an' in two shlapes, we'll hav' th' biggest *potlatch* in th' histhry av th' thribe. We'll dance all night, fr Oi'm gittin' owld,' says he, 'an' ut may be me lasht.' Oi hope so, thinks Oi, but Oi don't say so. An-nyhow, we kin resht airy fr a couple av days an' th' dogs'll be safe an' well fed. 'Twud be all a man's loife wuz wor-rth to har-rm wan till th' owld man gives th' wor-rd. Ye said ut wuz raylly hot in Flor-ridy, b'y? Hot enough, d'ye think, that a felly c'd set ar-round in his shir-rt shlaves, an' shmoke a bit av an avenin'?"

[198]

O'Brien offered to share his *igloo* with Connie and Waseche Bill, but they declined with thanks after one look into the smoky interior that fairly reeked with the stench of rancid blubber and raw skin bedding.

Hardly had the dogs been unharnessed before four Indians appeared with huge armfuls of frozen fish, and while the gaunt *malamutes* gnawed ravenously at the food, the whole village looked on, men and women licking their chops in anticipation of the coming *potlatch*, pointing out the choicest of the dogs, and gesticulating and jabbering over the division of the spoils. [199]

The light shelter tent, robes, and sleeping bags were removed from the sleds, and O'Brien offered to help.

"Set ut up clost ag'in' th' *igloo*," he said, "an' Oi'll tunnel a hole t'rough th' soide, an' tonight we kin lay an' plot loike Fenians, an' th' ar-risthocracy here'll think we're sound ashlope dhreamin' av *malamute* mulligan, an' dog's liver fried in ile."

The tent was quickly set up and Connie was about to loosen the lashings of the grub pack.

"How much grub hav' ye got?" asked the Irishman.

"We got a right smaht of grub, except fo' th' dawgs," answered Waseche.

"Don't uncover ut, thin," warned O'Brien. "Jist tilt yer tarp a bit an' pull out enough f'r th' suppher. They won't bother-r th' outfit none—th' owld man towld um to lave hands off an' they'd divide the whole shebang afther th' dance." [200]

"Yo' don't say," drawled Waseche. "Grandpa's a generous heahted ol' pahty, ain't he! D'yo' reckon we-all w'd be in on th' divvy, oah do we jest furnish the outfit?"

O'Brien grinned:

"Ye'd fare same as th' rist," he said. "Sharre an' shar-re aloike is th' rule here. Sur-re, they're socialists—ondly they don't know ut."

"Yo' say they won't let yo' get away from heah? What do they want of yo'—an' what do they want of us? Afteh they've et the dawgs an' divided the outfit, looks like they'd be glad to get rid of us."

O'Brien filled his pipe and noisily blew great clouds of smoke into the air:

"'Tis a thing Oi've niver found out. Six years Oi've bin hilt pr-risoner. They've thrayted me same as theirsilves. Oi do no mor-re wor-rk thin an-ny man av thim, an' av they're gluttid wid grub so'm Oi, an' av they're hungr-ry, Oi'm hungr-ry, too. Near-r as Oi kin make out Oi'm jist a kapesake—loike ye're grandfayther's swor-rd, or a canary." [201]

"How did Carlson an' Pete Mateese get away?"

"Sur-re, they niver wuz caught! They got to the Ignatook; that's phwat these haythen call th' creek av th' bilin' wather—an' they fear-r ut. Niver a man av thim will go into ut's valley. They say ut's divil-ha'nted. Th' wather's black an' bilin'—an' ut stinks. Ut's pizen, too; av ye dhrink ut ye'll die. They's a pile av bones, an' man-ny a skull ar-round th' owld copper mine. 'Twuz wan av thim Oi shlipped into th' rock cairn, back yondher, hopin' to warn th' fur-rst av th' shtampede to wait f'r th' rist, phwin th' Injuns robbed th' *cache*."

"Av we kin git to th' Ignatook wid th' dogs, we're safe. Oi've hid there a dozen toimes, but Oi niver c'd make th' outside f'r lack av dogs. They's sixteen hunder' pounds av caribou mate in th' tunnel, an' sixty percers av fish."

"They've an eye on us, an' Oi'm fear-red they'll mistrust we're plottin'. Wait till tonight, an' Oi'll go now an' make up a fairy shtor-ry that'll satisfy th' owld chayfe about our long palaver-r." [202]

O'Brien started toward the old shaman, but turned and retraced his steps:

"How man-ny quar-rts av nuggits did ye say?" he asked, as a far-away look crept into his eyes. Waseche Bill answered softly:

"I don't rightly know what nuggets is fetchin' a quaht. But, offhand, I'd say a quaht oah two w'd be a plenty to take yo' clean around the wohld."

CHAPTER XIV

THE ESCAPE FROM THE WHITE INDIANS

The man, O'Brien, despite the fact that he spent half his time mooning and muttering to himself about quarts of gold and the delights of a torrid clime, proved himself no mean strategist, and his intimate knowledge of the lay of the land and the habits and language of the natives, was invaluable in formulating the plan of escape.

Far into the night the three lay, Connie and Waseche Bill in their sleeping bags under the little

shelter tent pitched close against the rounded side of the *igloo*, and O'Brien lying inside the *igloo* upon his vile-smelling bed of skins with his face to the hole he had bored low in the snow wall.

Their only hope in getting out of the Lillimuit lay in saving the dogs, and it was decided that this could be accomplished only by a quick dash for the Ignatook, which joined the larger river a quarter of a mile to the northward. [204]

On the sleds remained about five hundred pounds of caribou venison, besides a small quantity of tea, coffee, bacon, and flour.

"Ut's loike this," concluded O'Brien, when the situation had been carefully reviewed from every slant and angle, "Oi'll go to owld Metlutak, tomorry, an' Oi'll say: 'Chayfe,' Oi'll say, 'thim dogs is a plinty soight ribbier thin phwat Oi thought they wuz. We can't git no fat onto um insoide av a wake or tin days but we kin hav' th' *potlatch* jist th' same—onldy we'll hav' *two potlatches* instead av th' wan. They is foive hunder' pounds av caribou mate on th' sleds an' we'll hav' th' caribou *potlatch* fur-rust, an' th' dog *potlatch* lather, phwin they've bin give a chanst to lay on some fat."

"Th' owld b'y won't loike th' caribou so much as th' dog but Oi'll pint out to um that av we use th' caribou fur-rust th' dogs can't shlip along in th' noight an' ate it up on us, whoilst av we kill th' dogs an' lave th' caribou, ye can't tell phwat w'd happin." [205]

"But the dogs couldn't eat the meat if they were dead!" objected Connie.

"Whisht lad! Th' chayfe don't know no 'rithmetic. Two *potlatches* is bether thin wan, an' beyant that he ain't goin' to study.

"We'll wor-rk ut loike this: they's about tin pound av mate apiece—no gr-reat glut—but enough to kape um busy afther th' dance. Th' dance'll begin phwin th' sun jist edges yondher peaks, an' wanst they git het to the wor-rk, 'twill kape up till mid-noight. We'll dhrag th' mate over, an' Bill, here, he'll shtand ridy wid his axe to cut ut in chunks, an' Oi'll toss ut to wan an' another so they'll all git a piece. They'll ghrab ut an' dhrive their har-rpoons into ut so they kin howld ut over th' foir-re an' thaw ut out. They'll ate ut raw off th' ind av th' har-rpoons—'tis a gr-rand soight!

"Now, her-re's phwere th' b'y comes in: as soon as Bill shtar-rts choppin' mate, ye must shlip over here an' har-rness th' dogs fr all ye're worth. Ye must finish befor th' mate's all doled out. Hav' th' loight grub an' th' robes an' shlapin' bags on th' sleds, but lave th' tint shtand. Lave th' roifles in th' pack; they've niver kilt me, an' Oi won't see har-rm come to thim—but av Oi c'd git a good cr-rack at wan or two wid me fisht, 'tw'd aise th' mimry av thim, twinty-wan toimes they've dhrug me back over th' tundra. [206]

"Wanst their har-rpoons gits dhrove into th' fr-rozen mate, they'll niver git um out till they're thawed out. They'll be too heavy to run wid, an' be th' toime they kin fr-ree thim, we'll be safe on th' Ignatook, phwere they wudn't come afther us av they doied fur-rst.

"We kin take our own toime gittin' to th' outside. They's plinty av grub in th' tunnel—an' plinty av gold, too—all put away in tomatty cans; an' they're heavy—foorty pound apiece they weigh, av they weigh an ounce—an' that's wan rayson they've tur-med me back thim twinty-wan toimes.

"How far-r did ye say ut wuz to Flor-ridy, afther ye cr-ross th' muskeg?" [207]

"I reckon it's quite a spell, O'Brien," answered Waseche. "But yo' c'n bet yo' last blue one, me an' th' kid'll see yo' git theah—an' don't yo' fo'get it!"

Darkness—not the black darkness of the States, but the long twilight of the early Arctic night—descended upon the Lillimuit. Upon the narrow plateau overlooking the unnamed river, squat fur-clad figures emerged from the tunnel-like entrances of the *igloos* and, harpoon in hand, moved slowly through the gloom toward a circular level of hard-packed snow immediately in front of the house of the chief, where other figures were busily heaping brushwood and frozen pieces of drift upon a fire that smoked and smouldered in the centre of the area.

At the edge of the circle, Waseche Bill, Connie Morgan, and O'Brien sat upon the haunches of venison and watched the strange men and women take their places about the fire where they ranged themselves in two circles, one within the other, and waited in stolid silence for the appearance of the two chiefs. [208]

Presently they approached, carrying queer shaped drums which consisted of a narrow frame or hoop of split willow about two feet in diameter. Upon these frames were stretched the thin, tough membranes that form the abdominal lining of the seal. A handle of carved walrus ivory was affixed to the hoop with lashings of sealskin. The chiefs carried no harpoons, and as each took his place, the old chief in the inner circle, and the young chief in the outer, they raised their drums and struck sharply upon the edges of the rims with their short ivory drumsticks. The sound produced was a resonant, rather musical note, and at the signal the circles moved, the inner from right to left, the outer from left to right. Slowly, at first, they moved to the measured beat of the drums. The scene was weird and impressive, with the strange, silent people circling in the firelight whose red flare now and then illumined their flat grease-glistening faces. The drums beat faster and between the beats could be heard the husk of the *mukluks* as they scraped upon the hard surface of the snow. [209]

Gloom deepened into darkness and still they danced. Suddenly out of the north flashed a broad band of light—mystic illusive light writhing and twisting—now bright—now dim. Rose flashed into amethyst and vivid scarlet into purple and pale yellow colouring the whole white world with its

reflected light.

Instantly the scene changed. Faster and faster beat the drums; faster and faster circled the dancers, and suddenly from every throat burst the strange words of a weird, unearthly chant:

"Kioya ke, Kioya ke,
A, yaña, yaña, ya,
Hwi, hwi, hwi, hwi!>

Tudlimana, tudlimana,
A, yaña, yaña, ya,
Hwi, hwi, hwi, hwi!

Kalutaña, Kalutaña,
A, yaña, yaña, ya,
Hwi, hwi, hwi, hwi!"

Eerie and impressive the sight, and eerie the rise and fall of the chant with which the children of the frozen wastes greet the Aurora—the flashing, hissing warning of the great Tuaña, the bad man, who lies dead at the end of the earth. [210]

The words ceased, the drums struck into a measured, monotonous, pom, pom, pom, and the dancers continued to circle about the fire. A man separated himself from the others and, stepping into the fire-lit circle, began to chant of his deeds of valour in the hunt, of his endurance on the trail, and his fortitude in accident and famine. As he chanted he danced, swaying and contorting his body, and then, either his tale was told, or he became weary and dropped back into the circle and gave place to another. Hour after hour the white men watched the strange incantations, moving about at intervals to keep warm. The endurance of the natives was a source of wonder to Connie and Waseche Bill. They had been continuously at it for nine hours, and it was midnight when O'Brien reached swiftly over and touched Connie upon the shoulder. [211]

"Look aloive, now, b'y! The owld chayfe is th-radin' his dhrum f'r a har-rpoon, an 'tis th' sign f'r th' *potlatch!*"

Sure enough! With amazing suddenness the circles broke up and the dancers made a concerted rush for the caribou meat. Connie slipped unnoticed into the shadows and ran for the sleds, while Waseche Bill swung his ax and O'Brien distributed the chunks to the crowding Indians.

As soon as one received his portion he placed it upon the snow and drove his harpoon in past the barbs to prevent its being jerked off in the wild scramble for a place at the fire. As O'Brien had said, the orgy that started as a religious ceremony was winding up like a Donnybrook fair, for the natives fought and pummelled each other with spear and fist in their efforts to thaw out their meat.

At the end of half an hour all were served and not a shred remained that was not firmly transfixed upon the point of a harpoon. Most of the Indians still fought by the fire, but some of the more fortunate had retreated to a distance and were gnawing and tearing at the raw chunks, using the harpoons in the manner of a huge fork. [212]

"Now's our chanst!" whispered O'Brien; and with an eye upon those who were eating, they dodged swiftly behind the chief's *igloo*.

When Connie reached the shelter tent he fell immediately to work harnessing the dogs which he roused from their snug beds in a huge snowdrift. At first his fingers trembled with excitement so that he fumbled clumsily at the straps, but he soon regained his nerve and, one after another, the *malamutes* were fastened into their proper places. He slipped the collar on to McDougall's gaunt leader and waited, tense with anxiety, listening and peering into the darkness for sound or sight of his two companions.

After what seemed hours of suspense, he saw them approaching at a run, and sprang to his place, his fingers gripping tightly the handle of his dog whip.

At the same instant, the boy became aware that the scene at the fireside had changed. In the uncertain light of the flaring flames he had been able to make out an indistinct blur of fighting figures accompanied by a jumble of growls and short, animal-like yelps, as the natives pushed and pummelled each other for a place by the coveted fire. As the figures of Waseche and O'Brien drew closer, the yelps and growls gave place to loud cries, the fighting ceased, and in the dim light Connie made out other running figures, and still others standing upon their chunks of meat and wrenching frantically to free their harpoons. [213]

The next instant Waseche Bill leaped to his dogs and O'Brien threw himself upon Connie's waiting sled.

"Let 'em go, kid!" cried Waseche, and the sharp crack of the dog whips rang on the air to the cries of: "Mush! Hi! Hi! Mush-u! Mush-u!"

Both teams shot away toward the inclined trail of the river. Neck and neck, they ran over the crusted snow, while the three free dogs romped and raced beside them. [214]

While most of the Indians followed directly in the wake of the retreating men, a few of the wiser ones cut straight for the head of the trail down which the outfit must pass. Waseche's eight

malamutes, travelling lighter than Connie's big ten-team, forged to the front and gained the incline at the same moment that three Indians led by Annunduk, the young chief, leaped out upon the trail. The natives, tired by their long exertions at the dance, had thrown away their weighted harpoons and, except for a short club that Annunduk had snatched from a *cache* frame as he ran, were unarmed.

Waseche dodged a blow from the club and an Indian who tried to throw himself upon the flying sled was hurled from the trail and rolled end over end down the steep hundred-foot slope to the river.

A quarter of a minute later McDougall's big *malamutes* swung into the trail and would have dashed past the spot before the Indians could have collected their senses, had not O'Brien, with Irish impetuosity, leaned far over the side and aimed a mighty blow of his fist at the head of Annunduk. The blow swung wide and O'Brien, losing his balance, pitched headlong into the snow almost at the Indian's feet. [215]

Connie, whose attention was upon the rushing dogs, felt the sled leap forward as the man's weight was removed, and without an instant's hesitation halted the dogs in their tracks and, clutching his dog whip, ran to the assistance of O'Brien, who was clawing and rolling about in the snow in a vain effort to regain his feet.

There was not a second to lose. By the light of the stars the boy saw Annunduk leap forward with club upraised, while the remaining Indian was making ready to spring upon the defenceless man from behind. Connie redoubled his efforts and, just as the chief raised his club for a long shoulder swing at O'Brien's head, the boy's fifteen-foot gut lash sang through the thin air. There was a report like a pistol-shot and, with a loud yell of pain, Annunduk dropped his club and clutched frantically at his face. [216]



"The boy's fifteen-foot lash sang through the thin air."

Meanwhile the other Indian had almost reached the Irishman who had scrambled to his hands and knees. Connie leaped backward to get the range of his long whiplash, but before the boy could draw back his arm, the air roared with a long, throaty growl and Slasher, the savage wolf-dog, with back-curved lips and flashing fangs, leaped past and launched himself full at the throat of the Indian. With awful impact, the great tawny brute landed squarely upon the man's chest, carrying him backward into the snow. The next instant the air was filled with frightened shrieks and ferocious, full-mouthed snarls as the wolf-dog tore and wrenched at the heavy skin shirt, while the terrified Indian protected his face with his arms. [217]

The whole incident occupied scarcely a minute, and Connie half-dragged the dazed O'Brien to his feet and hurried him to the sled. With a loud whistle to Slasher, the boy cracked his whip above the ears of the leader and, just as the head of the trail became black with pursuing Indians, the *malamutes* shot away, with Slasher running beside them, growling fiercely and shaking a great patch of quill-embroidered shirt front which waved from his tight-clamped jaws.

Down on the river, Waseche Bill was in the act of swinging his dogs for a dash over the back trail when the long ten-team rushed out onto the rime-carpeted ice. All danger from pursuit was past, and they jogged the teams slowly northward, while all about them fell the frost spicules in a feathery shimmer of tinsel. Ten minutes later O'Brien pointed out the trail which passed between two enormous rocks and entered the valley of the Ignatook, the creek of the stinking steam, into which the Indians dared not venture. And it was with a grateful sense of security and relief that they headed the dogs for the spot where they were to camp, in the old tunnel of the lost mine of the Ignatook—at the end of the dead man's lonely trail. [218]

CHAPTER XV

O'BRIEN'S CANS OF GOLD

When Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill awoke, the morning after their midnight escape from [219]

the village of the strange Indians, they found O'Brien busily engaged in the preparation of breakfast.

The tunnel of the ancient mine, that had been the abode of Carlson and Pete Mateese, was merely a rude entry which followed the slant of an outcropping mass of native copper. The entry was approximately five feet high and six feet wide, and led obliquely into the face of a rock-cliff for a distance of a hundred feet where it widened into a chamber, or room, perhaps twenty feet in diameter and seven or eight feet in height. Three walls of the room were formed by the copper ore which showed plainly the marks of the primitive tools of the forgotten miners. The fourth wall was of solid rock—the wall of the fissure that contained the vein of ore. At the angle formed by the roof and the rock wall, a wide crack, or cleavage cleft, slanted sharply upward and outward to a point on the face of the rock-cliff high above the mouth of the tunnel, and thus formed a natural chimney for the rude fireplace that had been built directly beneath it. [220]

The odour of boiling coffee was in the air and by the fireplace squatted O'Brien, prodding tentatively at the caribou steaks that sizzled noisily in the long-handled frying pan. Upon a flat stone that had evidently served for a table, an ancient lamp which consisted of a rudely hammered copper pan containing blubber grease and a bit of moss wicking, flared its smoky illumination.

"Good marnin' to yez," greeted the Irishman, as the two partners slipped from their sleeping bags and drew up close to the fire. "Sure, bhreakfasht'll be riddy in wan minit—an' a good job ut is, to be settin' wanst mor-re amongst Christians, an' aytin' whoite man's grub, inshtead av suckin' a shtrip av blubber, along av th' flat-faced Injuns, yondher." [221]

Connie laughed:

"Yes, but you nearly spilled the beans when you tumbled off the sled."

"Ahroo! Dar-rlint! Ut's a gr-rand lad ye ar-re! Ye shud av seen um!" he cried, turning to Waseche Bill. "Oi wanted to git jist th' wan swoipe f'r um to remimber me by, but Oi mished um fair an' square, an' over Oi wint loike a frog off a log in a bog. An' jist phwin Annunduk wuz about to presint his soide av th' case wid a bit av a club th' heft av a pick handle, crack! goes th' b'y's whiplash fair in th' face av um, an' phwin th' other goes to jump on me back, Whirra! They's a roar loike th' Zoo tur-rned loose f'r recess, an' th' wolf-dog's a-top av um, fang an' claw! Ye shud av seen ut! 'Twuz a gr-rand soight!"

Waseche smiled proudly as he listened to the Irishman's account of the accident on the trail.

"Yo' say, they won't follow us in heah?" he asked. [222]

"Niver a wan av thim. They think this valley is th' counthry av th' evil spirits. We're safe now—an' hooray, f'r Flor-ridy, an' th' land av sunshine!"

"We-all ain't out of the woods yet. I'm sho' glad to be shet of them Injuns, though. How many times did yo' say they'd brung yo' back?"

"Twenty-wan toimes. But, Oi hadn't no dogs—an' thim two tomatty cans is heavy!"

"Where are the cans?" asked Connie, who had only half believed the Irishman's tale of gold.

"Set by now an' ate, an' Oi'll show ye thim—the two av moine, an' th' twilve av Car-rlson's an' Pete Mateese's."

The meal over, O'Brien loosened a cleverly concealed wedge that held in place a stone which served as a door to a small compartment, about eighteen inches square and three feet deep, that had been chiselled into the copper on a level with the floor.

"'Tis th' safe," he grinned. "Foire proof, an' bhurglar proof, too, av ye don't know th' combynation, fer wid th' little wedge in place, th' more ye pryze on th' rock th' toighter ut shticks." [223]

Pushing the stone aside, the man reached into the interior and, one at a time, removed fourteen tin cans, which he carefully deposited upon the floor. Over the top of each, serving as a cover, and concealing the contents from view, was bound a piece of caribou skin, smoke-dried, with the hair on.

Connie reached for a can, but to his surprise it remained motionless as if nailed to the floor. It seemed incredible to the boy that such great weight could be encompassed within so small a space, and it was only at the expense of considerable effort that he succeeded in raising it to his lap. Cutting the thongs, he removed the cover and there, showing yellow and dull in the guttering flare of the blubber lamp, was gold! O'Brien spread an empty pack-sack and the boy poured the contents of the can upon it, and with his fingers levelled the golden pyramid. Before him lay nuggets, flat, dark flakes of "float," and bright yellow grains of "dust"—hand-shovelled, and hand-sluiced from the hot, wet sands of the Ignatook. Waseche Bill stared speechless at the row of skin-covered cans, at the pile of yellow metal, and back to the row of cans. For years this man had toiled and mucked among the placers of the gold fields, had sunk deep shafts, and shallow; had tunnelled, and drifted, and slosed about in ice-cold muddy creek beds, but in all the years of toil and hardship and peril, he had never gazed upon a sight like this. Even Ten Bow, with its rich drift sands, was a barren desert in comparison with this El Dorado of the frozen waste. [224]

"Nine thousan' dollahs a can—mebbe ten," he estimated, in an awed voice. "No wondeh Carlson

came back!" He turned to O'Brien:

"How deep was his shafts?"

"Shafts!" exclaimed the Irishman, "sure, they ain't no shafts! Ye dam off a puddle av wather phwer uts shallow an' throw in a chunk av oice to cool ut, an' thin ye wade in an' shovel ut into ye're sluices."

[225]

"An' wateh the yeah around!" cried Waseche.

"Aye, an' no dumps to wor-rk out in th' shpring—ye clane up as ye go. Wan shovel is good f'r a can, or a can an' a half a month."

The idea of a man measuring his dust by the forty-pound can, instead of by the ounce, was new, and Waseche Bill laughed—a short, nervous laugh of excitement.

"Come on! Shove them cans back in the hole an' le's go stake ouh claims. Yo' done stoke yo'n, ain't yo', O'Brien?"

"Oi've shtaked nawthin'! Oi jist scooped ut out here an' there, phwere their claims wasn't. Oi want none av this counthry! Oi've had enough av ut as ut is! Oi won't shtay wan minit longer thin Oi've got to—not av Oi c'n shovel out pure gold be th' scoopful! Oi want to be war-rm wanst more, an' live loike a civiloized Christian shud live, wid a pig an' a cow, an' a bit av a gar-rden.

"Ye'll not be thinkin' av shtayin' here?" he asked anxiously.

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"No, O'Brien," answered Waseche, "not *this* trip. But we ah goin' to stake ouh claims an' then, lateh, why me an' th' kid heah—we ah comin' back!"

"Come back av ye want to," said O'Brien with a shrug. "But luk out ye don't come back wanst too often. Phwere's Car-rlson, an' Pete Mateese? Thim's min that come back! An' wait till ye see th' skulls an' the bones along th' gravel at th' edge av th' wather—thim wuz min, too, wanst—they come back. An' luk at *me*! Four av us come in be way av Peel River—an' three av us is dead—an' many's th' toime Oi've wisht Oi wuz wan av thim." O'Brien replaced the stone, and the three turned their attention to their surroundings. One side of the room was piled to the ceiling with the caribou venison and fish of which O'Brien had spoken. They also found a sled and a complete set of harness for a six-dog team—Carlson's six dogs that had found their way into the boiling pots of the White Indians. Scattered about the stone floor lay numerous curiously shaped stone and copper implements, evidently the mining tools of a primitive race of people, and among these Connie also found ancient weapons of ivory and bone.

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Slowly they made their way toward the entrance, pausing now and then to examine the rough walls of the tunnel which had been laboriously driven through the mass of copper ore.

"Wonder who worked this mine?" speculated Connie. "Just think of men working for years and years, I s'pose, to dig out *copper*—with all that gold lying free in the gravel."

"Yeh, son, seems queeah to us. But when yo' come to think of it, coppeh's wo'th a heap mo'n gold, when it comes down to usin' it fo' hammehs, an' ha'poons, an' dishes. Gold ain't no real good, nohow—'cept fo' what it'll buy. An' if they ain't no place to spend it, a man mout a heap sight betteh dig out coppeh."

The sun was shining brightly on the snow when the three finally stood at the tunnel-mouth and gazed out into the valley of the Ignatook. A light wind carried the steam and frozen fog particles toward the opposite bank, whose high cliffs appeared from time to time as islands in a billowy white sea. Almost at their feet the waters of the creek wound between banks of glittering snow crystals, and above them the great bank of frozen mist eddied and rolled. The stakes Carlson had driven to mark his claim, and that of Pete Mateese, were plainly visible, and upon the black gravel at the water's edge were strewn the weather-darkened bones of many men.

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"The copper miners!" cried Connie, pointing toward the grewsome collection. Waseche nodded.

"I reckon so," he answered. "I wondeh what ailed 'em."

"Aye, what!" echoed O'Brien. "What but th' Ignatook—that's shpelt death to iverywan that's come into uts valley. Th' whole Lillimuit's a land av dead min. Av ut ain't th' wan thing, uts another. Phwere's Car-rlson, an' Pete Mateese? Av ye don't dhrink th' pizen wather, ye'll freeze, er shtar-rve, er ye'll go loike Craik an' Greenhow, that come in with me—an' that's th' wor-rst av all. Craik, glum an' sombre, follyin' day an' noight th' thrail av a monster white moose, that no wan ilse c'd iver see, an' that always led into th' Narth. An' Greenhow, yellin' an' laughin' loike foorty fiends, rushin' shtraight into th' mid-noight aurora—an' 'nayther come back!

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"Ye'd besht moind phwat Oi'm tellin' yez," he croaked, as he sat upon the bank and watched Waseche and Connie stake adjoining claims.

"Ut's th' same in th' ind," he continued, letting his glance rove over the tragic relics of a bygone race. "Some comes f'r copper, an' some f'r gold—an' phwere's th' good av ut? Th' metal is left—but th' bones av th' diggers mark th' thrail f'r th' nixt that comes! An' none goes back!"

"We're going back!" said Connie. "You don't know, maybe Pete Mateese got through."

"Mebbe he did—but ut's mebbier he didn't," despaired the man.

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"Now, look a heah, O'Brien," cut in Waseche, "yo' be'n up heah so long yo' plumb doleful an' sad-minded. We-all ah goin' to get out of heah, like the kid done told yo'. Come on along now an' stake out yo' claim 'long side of ou'n. I've mined, it's goin' on fo'teen yeah, now—an' I neveh seen no pay streak like this heah—not even Nome, with her third beach line; the Klondike, with its shallow gravel; oah Ten Bow, with its deep yellah sand. It's no wondeh yo' expected a stampe."

But the Irishman was obdurate and, despite all persuasion, flatly refused to stake a claim.

"Come on, then," said Waseche. "We-all got to locate that map of Carlson's. He said how he mapped the trail to the Kandik."

"Sure, an' he did!" exclaimed O'Brien. "Oi found th' map six months agone. But ivery toime Oi'd thry to folly ut, thim danged haythins ud dhrag me back."

"Where is the map? Le's see it," said Waseche. O'Brien stared from one to the other of his companions, with a foolish, round-eyed stare. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and without a word dashed down the creek in the direction of the river, leaving Waseche and Connie to gaze after him in astonishment. [231]

"Where's he going?" asked the boy.

"Sea'ch me!" exclaimed Waseche; "come on—we got to catch him. Me'be he's took a spell. Po' fellow, I'd hate fo' anything to happen to him now."

O'Brien had obtained a very considerable lead when the others started and, giving no heed to their cries to halt, he lumbered heavily onward. Connie and Waseche ceased to call and, saving their breath, dashed after him as fast as their legs could carry them. The Irishman was in good muscle and wind, thanks to his life in the open, but in neither speed nor endurance was he a match for his pursuers, who were iron-hard from the long snow trail. When O'Brien neared the pass that gave out onto the river, the two partners redoubled their efforts and, although they gained perceptibly, O'Brien was still ten yards in advance when he plunged between the two upstanding rocks that Connie had named the "gate-posts of the Ignatook." [232]



"As they passed between the pillared rocks the Indians broke cover, hurling their copper-tipped harpoons as they ran."

Without a moment's hesitation, the boy, who had outdistanced Waseche, dashed after him and with a "flying tackle" tripped the fleeing man, so that both rolled over and over upon the rime-covered ice of the river. And Waseche Bill, bursting upon the scene, saw, approaching silently and swiftly among the rocks and scrub of the river's edge, shadowy, fur-clad forms. The White Indians were guarding well the egress from the creek of the frozen steam. [233]

Hastening to the two struggling figures, Waseche jerked them to their feet, and before the surprised O'Brien knew what was happening, he was being unceremoniously hustled into the narrow valley from which he had just emerged—and none too soon, for as they passed between the pillared rocks, the Indians broke cover and rushed boldly upon them, hurling their copper-tipped harpoons as they ran.

CHAPTER XVI

FIGHTING THE NORTH

"Wheheveh was yo' aimin' fo' to go to?" interrogated Waseche, when they were once more safely seated about the fireplace in the room at the end of the old mine tunnel.

"Sure, ut's th' map!" answered O'Brien, in a tone of the deepest dejection.

"The map! What about it?"

"Ut's in me other pants!" wailed the Irishman. "Back in th' *igloo!*"

"The *igloo*! The *igloo*—back there?"

"That same," nodded O'Brien, shamefacedly dropping his glance before the wrathful glare of Waseche's eyes. "Ye see, ut's loike this: two years ago, Oi bruk away fr' th' haythins an' made th' Ignatook. Car-rlson an' Pete Mateese wuz here thin, an' Oi shtayed wid um f'r a month, until wan day Oi wuz fishin' in th' river, an' they shwooped down an' caught me befoor Oi c'd git back into th' valley. Afther that they watched me clost, an' befoor Oi c'd git away ag'in Car-rlson an' Pete Mateese wuz gone. 'Twuz thin Oi found his map, pegged to a caribou haunch on top av th' pile yondher, an' Oi shtayed here an' wor-rked till Oi'd all th' gold Oi c'd pack, an' thin Oi shtar-rted f'r th' Kandik. They caught me, av coorse, bekaze th' heft av thim cans, along wid phwat grub Oi wuz dhraggin' on th' sled, wuz more thin a wan man load. They're sooperstitious about th' creek, an' th' gold, too, an' they slung th' cans back into th' valley.

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"That's two toimes Oi got away, an' since that they ain't watched me so clost, f'r they've lur-rned that widout dogs, Oi can't make ut to th' outside—an' Be Jabbers! nointeen toimes since, Oi've been dhrug back, but Oi always kep' th' map f'r fear that sometoime Oi'd git to use ut—an' now, phwin we've got th' chanst, Oi've gone an' murdhered us all be layvin' ut behint—an' all on account av th' dance an' th' *potlatch*, be rayson av which Oi wint an' changed me britches!"

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The man's grief was so genuine, and his dejection so deep that the wrathful gleam faded from Waseche Bill's eyes, and Connie moved nearer and placed his hand upon the Irishman's shoulder.

"Never mind, O'Brien. You didn't mean to leave the map—we know that—don't we, Waseche?"

"Sho', he didn't," answered the man, gloomily. "But that don't help the *case* any. How we-all ah goin' to get out of heah, now, is mo'n I know—"

"Me nayther," assented O'Brien. "Av Oi'd shtayed in Kildare, Oi w'dn't be here now. We bether go back an' settle down wid th' Injuns—av we c'n make friends wid um ag'in, befoor they har-poon us—f'r Oi'll niver see Flor-ridy, now!"

Connie leaped to his feet and stood before the two men, who looked into the narrowing grey eyes that flashed in the flickering flare of the blubber lamp.



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"You make me tired!" cried Connie. "Anybody'd think you needed a city, with the streets all numbered, to find your way around."

"You make me *tired*!" cried the boy, "both of you—with your talk of not getting out of the Lillimuit; and of going back to the Indians! Why, they'd eat up our dogs, and then we *couldn't* get out! What's got into you, Waseche? Buck up! Anybody'd think you needed a city, with the streets all numbered, to find your way around!"

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"Carlson came in by the Tatonduk—and he went out by the Kandik—his first trip, when he showed the nuggets he brought back. Who made Carlson's map? He was a sourdough—but he has

nothing on *us*! He found his own way out—and so will we! If we miss the Kandik, we'll find a pass of our own—or a river—or a creek! We're not afraid of the Lillimuit. It hasn't got us yet! And it isn't going to! We've got the dogs, and we've got the grub—and we've got the nerve to back them. We'll hike to the outside on our own trail—and we'll turn around and come back after the gold!

"But, if we don't make it—and have to die out there in the White Country—when they find us, they'll know *men* died! We'll be, anyway, *one* day's mushing ahead of our last camp fire!"

Waseche leaped to the boy's side and grasped the small, doubled fist.

"They sho' *will*, kid!" he cried. "They sho' *will*! But they ain't a goin' to find us bushed! I wisht yo' daddy c'd of heahd yo' then—He was *some* man, Sam Mo'gan was, an' he'd sho' be proudful of his boy!" [239]

"I'm plumb 'shamed, pahdneh, fo' to gloomed up on yo' that-a-way—ain't we, O'Brien?"

"We ar-re, that!" shouted the Irishman, with a new light in his eyes. "Ye're a gr-rand lad, wid a hear-rt, in ye're ribs, that's th' heart av a foightin' man. F'r all ye're small soize, ye're th' gamest wan av th' three av us. An' uts Pathrick O'Brien'll folly ye to th' top av' th' narth pole, av ye say th' wor-rd."

A week was spent in exploring the valley of the Ignatook and in prospect panning at different points along the mysterious boiling creek whose hot, black gravel showed an unbelievably rich pay streak.

O'Brien improved rapidly from day to day. The despairing, furtive look faded from his eyes, which glowed with a new hope and a new-born determination to do a man's part in the accomplishment of a purpose. His wild dash for the river showed the utter futility of attempting to recover Carlson's map, for the loss of which he blamed himself bitterly. Nevertheless, the words of the boy put new heart into the lonely man, who ceased mumbling and muttering of Florida, and threw himself with a will into the work in hand. [240]

The high rock-cliffs that flanked the valley of the Ignatook curved toward the west in two solid walls, unbroken except at a point two miles above the old mine, where a narrow ravine led in a long, winding slope to the level of the surrounding plateau.

It was by way of this ravine, O'Brien assured them, Carlson had taken his departure; and that this fact was known to the White Indians was clearly demonstrated when, each day they saw silent fur-clad figures silhouetted against the clearcut skyline. There was something ominous and forbidding in the attitude of the silent sentinels of the frozen wastes who thus guarded the exits from the valley of the creek-of-the-steam. Time and again Connie glanced from the immutable watchers to the blackened bones upon the gravel at his feet. These were men, once; had they really drunk the poison water? Or, had they been held prisoners until they starved, by the human vultures that gloated in their lonely perches high among the rim-rocks? [241]

"If you couldn't outguess 'em, why didn't you rush 'em?" he asked one day, addressing a sightless, grinning skull. And behind him, O'Brien laughed.

"They won't foind our-rn here, will they, b'y?"

"You bet they won't!" exclaimed Connie, and shook a small fist at a solitary, motionless figure on the brink of the high rock wall.

To the westward of the mouth of the ravine the walls drew close together, so that the hot black waters of the creek completely filled the narrow gorge and effectively blocked any further ascent of the valley.

"I don't like to huht no one, needless," said Waseche Bill, as they sat about the fireplace one evening discussing plans for escape; "but we-all got to get out of heah—an' we ah *goin'* to get out too—an' if it comes right down to a matteh of *them*, oah *us*, why it's theah own fault if they get huht." [242]

"Yis," agreed O'Brien, "Oi shpose ye're roight. But, somehow—ye see—they divoided grub wid me phwin they wuz hungr-ry."

"I know, O'Brien, but that don't give 'em no right to hold us heah, an' to stahve us an' steal ouh dawgs, neitheh. We need them dawgs to get back with—an' we ah goin' to keep 'em. We-all cain't stay heah no longeh—much. 'Cause, outside of the meat an' fish, we ah runnin' pow'ful shoht of grub. An', besides, the days is gettin' longeh mighty fast, an' the trail ahead of us is a long trail—even if we have good luck, an' if the snow softs up on us we cain't haul no load, an' when it melts we cain't cross no rivehs, an' if we get to the mountains yondeh, we won't have no ice-trail to get out on. No, seh! We got to get out of heah—an' we got to go *now*—an' if anyone tries fo' to stop us, why somethin's goin' to happen—that's all." [243]

"They's wan way—an' ondly wan, that we c'n me'be give um th' shlip," said O'Brien. "'Tain't no use thryin' ut in th' dar-rk, f'r th' rayvine is narrow an' they've a foire at th' head uv ut. We'll be travellin' 'heavy, an' we can't git t'rough um wid a whoop an' hurrah, loike we done in th' village—but we moight shlip by in th' shnow."

"In the snow?" asked Connie. "What do you mean?"

"Sur-re, they's a star-rm brewin'—th' soigns is roight, an' th' fale av ut's in th' air. Wan day, or

two, an' she'll br-reak, beloike, on th' tur-rn av th' moon. Phwin she thickens up, th' Injuns'll hit f'r th' *igloos* as fasht as their legs'll carry thim, an' not a nose'll they shtick outside till ut quits shnowin'. F'r they've a fear in their hear-rts f'r th' star-rm, an' they've no shtummick f'r to be ketched out in ut—"

"Them, an' me—both!" interrupted Waseche Bill.

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"Ahroo! Now, come on! Ut's f'r their own good we're doin' ut. Oi know th' fur-rst fifteen er me'be ut's twinty moiles av th' thrail to th' Kandik. We'll wor-rk ut loike this: They know they's a star-rm comin'—Oi seen a little knot av um on th' edge av th' clift a jabberin' an' p'intin' into th' Narth. We'll let um see us fetchin' wood into th' moine, loike we wuz gittin' ridy to hole up f'r th' star-rm. Th' sleds we'll load jist insoide th' mouth av th' tunnel, an' phwin they hit f'r th' village we'll har-rness th' dogs an' shlip up th' rayvine, an' out achrost th' bench. They's a bit av a mountain out yondher, me'be ut's tin moiles, an' on th' soide av ut we c'n camp snug in th' scrub, till th' shnow quits. Our tr-racks'll be burried, an' ut'll be a couple av days befor they foind out we're gone, an' be th' toime they've picked up our thrail, we'll be out av their raych—f'r they'll venture not far-r to th' west, havin' fear-r av phwat lies beyant."

O'Brien finished, and Waseche turned to Connie:

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"What do yo' say, son?" he asked. "Shall we try it? It ain't a goin' to be no snap, out theah on the white bench with the snow an' th' roahin' wind. It's a funny thing—this heah takin' a long chanst jes' to keep a gang of Injuns from hahmin' us so we won't hahm them."

"They divoided their grub," repeated O'Brien, with an appealing glance at the boy.

"And, for *that*, we'll take a chance!" answered Connie. "We're game."

Breakfast over, the following morning, the three busied themselves in cutting firewood and carrying it into the tunnel. Indians appeared here and there among the rim-rocks and, after watching for a time, departed in the direction of the village. By noon, the weather had thickened perceptibly. A thin grey haze filled the atmosphere through which the weak rays of the Arctic sun filtered feebly. There was no wind, and the air lost its invigorating crispness and clung heavily about them like a wet garment. No more Indians appeared upon the edges of the cliffs and Waseche Bill ventured upon a scouting expedition up the narrow ravine, while Connie and O'Brien remained behind to pack the sleds and carry an occasional armful of firewood for the benefit of any lingering observer.

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The boy insisted upon loading Carlson's sled, carefully fitting the collars to the necks of his own three dogs, which had been hardly a half-dozen times in the harness since their memorable dash through the hills when Connie beat out the Ten Bow stampede.

Waseche returned reporting a clear trail, and all fell to harnessing the dogs.

"Whateveh yo' doin' with *that* sled?" asked Waseche, in surprise.

"I'm going to take it along," answered Connie. "You can't ever tell what will happen, and old Boris and Mutt and Slasher may as well be working as running loose."

Waseche grinned:

"Go ahead if yo' want to. Them ol' dawgs mout get somewhehs with it, an' if they don't, yo' c'n cut yo' trace-lines an' tu'n 'em loose."

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"*Is that so!*" flared the boy. "If there's any cutting loose to be done, you can do it yourself! *This* sled goes to Ten Bow! And, what's more, there isn't a lead dog in the world that can touch old Boris—and you know it! And if big Mutt couldn't out-pull any two of your dogs, he'd be ashamed to waggle his tail! And Slasher could lick your whole team—and Mac's, too! And I wouldn't trade a flea off any one of my dogs for your whole string of mangy *malamutes—so there!*"

Waseche chuckled with delight as he winked at O'Brien:

"If yo' eveh want to staht somethin' right quick," he laughed, "jest yo' go ahead an' belittle th' kid's dawgs." And then he dodged swiftly as one of the boy's heavy mittens sailed past his head and slapped smartly against the wall.

O'Brien's two cans of gold were removed from the "safe" and placed, together with the sleeping-bags, robes and blankets, upon Connie's sled. The stone was adroitly wedged into place and arranged so naturally that no marauding visitor could possibly have guessed that the innocent-appearing rock concealed a treasure of upwards of one hundred thousand dollars' worth of pure gold. The caribou venison and fish, together with what remained of the outfit, had already been securely lashed to the larger sleds and, with a last look of farewell, the little cavalcade moved from the tunnel-mouth and headed for the ravine.

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All trace of the sun was obliterated, and for the first time since the big blizzard, the Arctic sky was overcast with clouds.

Waseche Bill took the lead with McDougall's big ten-team, Connie followed with his own three dogs, while O'Brien, with Waseche's team, brought up the rear. The sleds slipped smoothly over the dry frost spicules, and the eyes of the three adventurers eagerly sought the edges of the high cliffs for signs of the White Indians. But no living, moving thing was visible, and, save for the occasional creak of runners, the white, frozen world was a world of silence.

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A half-hour later the *malamutes* headed up the ravine and humped to the pull of the long ascent. Rapidly, the weather thickened, and when, at last, they gained the bench, it was to gaze out upon an eerie, flat, white world of fore-shortened horizon. The sleds were halted while the three took their bearings. O'Brien pointed unhesitatingly toward the opaque west, and Waseche swung McDougall's leaders.

"Mush yo'! Mush yo'!" he yelled. "Hooray fo' Alaska!"

"An' Flor-ridy, too!" yelled O'Brien, and then a puff of wind—chill wind, that felt strangely clammy and damp in the intense cold, came out of the North. The long, serpentine bank of frozen fog that marked the course of the Ignatook, shuddered and writhed and eddied, while ragged patches of frozen rack detached themselves and flew swiftly southward. The air was filled with a dull roar, and a scattering of steel-like pellets hissed earthward. A loud cry pierced the roar of the approaching storm, and before them stood a solitary White Indian, immovable as a statue, with one arm pointing into the North. For a long moment he stood and then, in a whirl of flying spume, disappeared in the direction of the village.

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"Come on, boys!" cried Connie, and his voice sounded far and thin. "Dig in! 'Cause we're right now *fighting the North!*"

CHAPTER XVII

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THE SNOW TRAIL

The situation faced by Connie Morgan, Waseche Bill, and O'Brien when they headed westward across the snow-ridden bench of the Lillimuit, was anything but encouraging. Before them, they knew, lay Alaska. But how many unmapped miles, and what barriers of frozen desert and insurmountable mountains interposed, they did not know; nor did they know the location of the Kandik, the river by which Carlson had returned to the land of men. For Carlson's trail map lay hidden in the pocket of O'Brien's discarded trousers in an *igloo* in the village of the White Indians, and upon their own worth must the three win—or die.

There was no turning back now. No returning to the Ignatook to face starvation and the melting of the snow, for the solitary Indian who witnessed their departure had dashed to the village, bearing the information to his tribe.

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If O'Brien were right in his conjecture that the Indians would not venture into the open in a storm, there would, in all probability, be several days in which to escape, for Arctic storms are rarely of short duration. This seeming advantage, however, was offset by the fact that, at best, the storm would seriously impede their own progress, and at worst—well, if the worst happened, it would make no smallest particle of difference whether the White Indians picked up their trail soon, or late.

After the first fierce rush had passed, the storm lulled and settled into a steady drive of wind-hurled pellets that cut the thick air in long, stinging slants. The dry, shot-like particles burned and bit at the faces of the three, and danced and whirled merrily across the hard surface of the snow to drift deep against obstructions. The dogs were in fine condition, well fed, and thoroughly rested during the days of inactivity, and they strung out to the pull with a will. The trail was fast. The hard crust of the old snow gave excellent footing and the three heavily loaded sleds slipped smoothly and steadily in the wake of Waseche Bill, who piloted the expedition at a long, swinging trot, with Connie and O'Brien running beside their respective sleds.

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It was well past noon when the start was made, and the thick gloom of a starless night settled upon the storm-swept bench as the little cavalcade reached O'Brien's "bit av a mountain," and swung into the shelter of the thicket upon its lee side. The dogs were unharnessed and fed, a fire lighted, and a snug camp sprang into existence under the deft movements of the experienced *tilllicums*.

"'Tis a foine shtar-rt we've made," said O'Brien, as he poured melted suet over the caribou steak upon his tin plate, "but they'll be lookin' f'r us here, f'r they've dhrug me out av th' scrub on this hill a full dozen av toimes."

"We'll hit the trail at daylight," answered Waseche Bill.

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"Ut slues to th' Narth a bit from here. Oi've thr-ravelled th' nixt tin moile or so, but beyant that Oi've niver be'n able to git."

All night the hard, dry snow fell, and all night the wind swept out of the North with a low, monotonous roar. By the light of the flaring fire they breakfasted, and at the first hint of dawn again took the trail. A dreary scene confronted the little party that pulled heavily out of the sheltered thicket. All about them was the whirling, driving whiteness, and beneath their feet the loose, dry snow shifted and they sank ankle deep into the yielding mass. The sleds pulled hard, so that the dogs clawed for footing, and the snowshoes were placed conveniently upon the top of the packs, for soon the rackets would be necessary in the fast deepening snow.

O'Brien insisted that the trail "slued to the Narth a bit," and as there was nothing for it but to follow the Irishman's vague direction, Waseche changed the course, a proceeding that added materially to the discomfort of the journey, as it forced them to travel more nearly into the teeth of the wind. At noon a halt was made for luncheon and a brief rest in the shelter of the close-drawn sleds. During the last hour the character of the storm had changed and the wind whipped upon them in veering gusts that struck furiously from every point of the compass at once. The snow, too, changed, and the hard, dry pellets gave place to a fine, powdery snow-dust that filled the eyes and nostrils and worked uncomfortably beneath the clothing. Snow-shoes were fastened on, and with lowered heads and muffled faces the three headed again into the unknown.

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With the coming of darkness, they camped at the fork of a frozen river where a sparse growth of stunted willow gave promise of firewood and scant shelter. They were in a new world, now—a world, trackless and unknown, for during the afternoon they had passed beyond O'Brien's farthest venture and the Irishman was as ignorant of what lay before them as were Connie and Waseche Bill, who knew only that they were in the midst of a trackless void of seething snow, with the White Indians behind them and Alaska before—and all about them, death, grim and silent, and gaunt—death that stalked close, ready on the instant to take its toll, as it had taken its toll from other men who had braved the Lillimuit and never again returned.

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"She's a *reg'lah* blizzahd, now," remarked Waseche, as he lighted his pipe with a brand from the camp-fire. "Any otheh time, we'd lay by an' wait fo' it to weah down—but, we dastn't stop."

"The Indians will never pick up our trail when this storm quits," ventured Connie.

"No—'ceptin' they're wise that we-all tuck out this-away, havin' followed O'Brien almost this fah befo'."

"Aye—her-re, or her-re abouts," assented the Irishman, "we nade an-nyways wan mor-re day av thrailin' before we hole up, an' me'be be that toime th' star-rm will be wor-re out."

On the morning of the third day they again started in the dull grey of the dawn. Waseche, with lowered head, bored through the white smother that surrounded them like a wall of frozen fog. The dogs, still in good heart, humped bravely to the pull, and Connie and O'Brien, with hands clutching the tail-ropes of the sleds, followed blindly. On and on they plodded, halting at intervals only long enough to consult the compass, for with nothing to sight by, they held their course by the aid of the needle alone.

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Suddenly Connie's sled stopped so abruptly that the boy tripped and sprawled at full length beside its canvas-covered pack, while behind him, Waseche's leaders, in charge of O'Brien, swerved sharply to avoid the savage fangs of Slasher—for the wolf-dog knew his kind—he knew that, once down, a man is *meat*, and the moment the boy fell helpless into the snow, the great, gaunt brute surged back in the traces, jerking old Boris and Mutt with him, and stood guard over the prostrate form of his master, where he growled defiance into the faces of the dogs of the following team. Scrambling hastily to his feet, Connie was joined by O'Brien and together they stumbled forward where McDougall's big ten-team had piled up in a growling, snapping tangle upon the very brink of a perpendicular precipice. For the leaders had leaped back from the edge so suddenly that they fouled the swing dogs which, with tooth and nail, and throaty growl, were protesting against the indignity.

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"Where's Waseche!" The voice of the boy cut high and thin above the roar of the storm-choked wind, and O'Brien ceased abruptly his endeavour to straighten out the fighting *malamutes*. He stumbled hastily to the boy's side, but Waseche was no place to be seen, and upon the verge of the chasm, the overhanging snow-rim was gouged deep and fresh with a man-made scar.

The dogs were forgotten, and for a long moment the two stood peering over the edge, striving to penetrate the writhing whirl of snow-powder that filled the yawning abyss—but the opaque mass gave no hint of the depth or extent of the chasm. Again and again they shouted, but their voices were drowned in the bellow of the wind, and to their ears was borne no faintest answering call.

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To Connie Morgan it seemed, at last, he had come to the end of the trail. A strange numbness overcame him that dulled his senses and paralyzed his brain. His mind groped uncertainly.... Waseche was gone! He had fallen over the edge of the cliff and was lying at the bottom—and they would find him there—the men who were to come—and himself and O'Brien they would find at the top—and the dogs were all tangled—and it would be better, now, to sleep. No—they must push on—they were on the trail.... Where were they going? Oh, yes, to Alaska—back to Ten Bow, and the cabin, and the claim! But they couldn't go on.... This was the *end*.... They had come to the place where the world breaks off—and Waseche had fallen over the edge.

The boy gazed stupidly into the milky, eddying chaos. It looked soft, down there—like feathers, or the meringue on pie. It is a good place to fall, he thought, this place where the world stops—you could fall, and fall, and fall, and you wouldn't have to light—and it would be fun. The Lillimuit was a funny place, anyway—"the country where men don't come back from," Joe had said, that night—back there in the hotel at Eagle. Carlson didn't come back—

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"Why, Carlson's dead!" he cried so sharply that, at his side, O'Brien started.

"Sur-re, b'y, he's dead—but—" The man's voice aroused him as from a dream. His brain cleared, and suddenly he realized that Waseche Bill was lost—was even then lying wounded—probably dead, at the bottom of the cliff. With a low, choking sob, the boy whirled on O'Brien, who jumped

at the sharp word of command:

"Get the ropes! Quick! While I unharness the dogs!" The Irishman sprang to the rear sled where two forty-foot coils of *babiche* line lay ready for just such an emergency, while Connie sprang among McDougall's tangled *malamutes*, slashing right and left with his coiled whiplash. At the sudden attack the dogs ceased fighting and cowered whimpering while the boy slipped their collars, and by the time O'Brien returned with the lines, Connie was ready for the next move. [261]

"Work the sled closer—crossways! *Crossways*—so she'll hold!" he cried, as he knotted the lines securely together and made an end fast about his body.

"Brace against the sled, now, and lower away!"

"Phwat ye goin' to do?" asked the man, eyeing the line.

"*Do!* I'm going after Waseche, of course—"

"But, ye don't know how daype ut is—an' th' rope moight bre'k!"

"What difference does *that* make?" cried the boy. "If the rope won't reach—we'll make it reach! We'll splice on the harness, and the blankets, and the tarps, and the robes, and whatever else we can lay our hands on—and if it don't reach then, we'll kill the dogs! I'll get my pardner out of there if I have to kill every dog in the outfit and use their hides. And if the rope breaks—I'll be where Waseche is, anyway!" [262]



"Without waiting for a reply, Connie slipped softly over the edge."

Without waiting for a reply, the boy seated himself in the snow and slipped softly over the edge. Slowly he descended into the riot of whirling snow, while above him, O'Brien, with heels braced against the runners of the heavy sled, carefully paid out the line. Down, down, he went, scraping and bumping against the wall. It seemed to the impatient boy as though each moment he must reach the end of his rope—surely, he had descended eighty feet! But on he went, down, down, down—and then, when the suspense was becoming almost unbearable, his feet touched bottom, and he stood upright upon the snow. And, above, O'Brien felt the line go slack, and heaved a great sigh of relief as he glanced at the scant six feet of rope that remained. [263]

Jagged rock-slivers protruded from the snow, here and there, at the base of the cliff, and Connie shuddered as he gazed about him. Suddenly he cried out, and plunged to the end of his line, for there, close beside a huge block of stone, he made out a dark blur on the white surface of the snow—it was the back of a fur *parka*!

The next instant, the boy was kneeling beside the inert form of Waseche Bill. Frantically he pulled and hauled at the man until at length he succeeded in turning him upon his back, and then it was he noticed the leg doubled curiously beneath him. Very gently Connie laid hold of the foot and drew it into position beside the other, and as the leg straightened out he could feel the grating rasp of bone on bone—the leg was broken! [264]

His first thought was to arouse the unconscious man, but instead he began swiftly to remove the rope from about his own body and fasten it firmly under Waseche's armpits.

"If I wake him up now, it will hurt like thunder when O'Brien hauls him up," he muttered, as he gave the three quick jerks to the line that had been the agreed signal to "haul away." The next moment the rope went taut, and slowly, very slowly, the inanimate form lifted and swung clear of the snow.

O'Brien was a big man—and a strong one. But for the next few minutes he had his work cut out.

"He's found um!" he panted, as he paused to rest, with the rope wrapped tightly about his arm. "Sur-re, th' b'y's niver as heavy as that—an', be jabbers! Oi belayve th' two av thim's cumin' up to wanst."

At length Waseche's body wedged against the edge of the cliff and O'Brien, making the line fast to the heavy sled, dragged the unconscious form clear, and weighting the line with an ice ax, lowered it into the chasm. Five minutes later the boy scrambled over the rim, and dropped to his knees beside the inert form in the snow. [265]

"Get up the shelter tarp—quick!" he ordered, as he scraped the loose snow from a wide space

near the sled and, rummaging in his pack, produced a quantity of grease-soaked moss and a bundle of dry firewood.

"His leg's broken, and we've got to set it," he explained, as a tiny flame flared in the shelter of the wide tarpaulin, and he proceeded to remove the man's *mukluk* and heavy socks.

"Ye'll fr-reeze his leg!" exclaimed O'Brien, in alarm.

"Can't help it—we've got to take a chance. He'll die, or be crippled for life if we don't set it—so here goes!"

The foot was badly swollen, and midway between the ankle and the knee was a great bluish-green bruise where the leg had struck the rock at the foot of the cliff. The blow had broken both bones, and the overlapping ends made an unsightly bunch upon the side of the leg. Deftly and skilfully the boy's fingers explored the hurt. [266]

"We've got to pull 'em by and snap 'em into place," he explained. "I know how—we set Newt Boyer's legs, in Ten Bow, when a log rolled on him."

Again they made the line fast beneath the man's shoulders, and bound him firmly to the loaded sled. O'Brien seized hold of the foot and, bracing himself in the snow, pulled for all he was worth, while Connie pressed against the bone ends with his palms.

"Pull! *Pull*—can't you!" urged the boy. "Only a quarter of an inch more and they'll click—and the job will be done!" But O'Brien was pulling, and although he strained and tugged to the very limit of his strength, the ends still overlapped. Suddenly the boy leaped to his feet.

"Swing those dogs in here!" he cried, pointing to Waseche's team that remained still harnessed. "A little farther! Woah! That'll do—now, wait!" Swiftly he stooped, and with a few quick turns, bound the injured foot tightly to the back of the sled. [267]

"Now, pull up—easy, at first—don't jerk! That's right!" he cried, as the leg stretched taut, "now, make 'em *pull*!"

Again the boy dropped to his knees and worked rapidly with his fingers, while under O'Brien's urging Waseche's *malamutes* humped and clawed as they pulled. There was a slight click, as the bone-ends snapped into place, and the Irishman heard the delighted voice of the boy:

"Woah! She's set! She's set! Ease off, now, and hand me the splints!"

The splints, rudely split from pieces of firewood, were applied and held in place by strips torn from the tarp, a blanket was wrapped about the injured member, and the patient made as comfortable as possible beside the fire in the lee of the shelter tarp. But it was an hour later before Waseche Bill opened his eyes and gazed inquiringly about him. [268]

"What happened?" he asked, as a sharp pain caused him to stare in surprise toward his blanket-swathed leg.

"Sur-re, ye walked over th' edge av a clift, an' lit on th' rocks, a mather av siventy feet below—an' th' b'y, here, wuz over an' afther yez befoor ye lit. Yer leg's bruk squar-re in two, but th' lad set ut loike an-ny dochter c'd done—an' bether thin most."

"O'Brien helped!" interrupted Connie.

"Aye, a bit. An' so did the dogs. But, th' b'y—he wuz th' captain. Ye sh'd o' seed um shlip over th' edge on th' ind av his thread av a loine, into th' whirlin' scather av shnow, when ye c'd see nayther bottom nor soides. 'Oi'm a-goin afther Waseche!' he says—An' he done so."

"O'Brien pulled you up," said the boy, as Waseche leaned over and grasped the small hand in his own big one. He spoke no word, but in the pressure of the mighty hand-grasp the boy read the man-sign of *tillicums*.

CHAPTER XVIII

 [269]

ALASKA!

They camped for the remainder of the day.

"'Tain't no use grumblin' on ouh luck," remarked the philosophical Waseche. "We got to camp right heah till the stawm weahs out. Chances is, we'll have the Injuns onto us in a day oah so; but we cain't go bluste'catin' no mo' wheah we cain't see. Anyhow, they ain't no use borrowin' trouble—theh's a right smaht of it a-comin' to a man without him huntin' none. So fah, we're all to the good. The big Nawth's fightin' to hold her secrets, but she ain't handed us no knockout—yet."

During the night the storm ceased, and with the first hint of dawn the outfit was made ready for the trail. Robes were spread upon Connie's light sled, and Waseche Bill placed in his sleeping bag and bound securely upon the robes with many turns of *babiche*. The bundles of firewood, and O'Brien's cans of gold were transferred to the other sleds, and in the dull grey of the long [270]

morning twilight the outfit pulled southward over the bench, paralleling the edge of the ravine into which Waseche had fallen. Progress was slow. The fresh snow rolled up and clogged the free running of the sleds, so that both Connie and O'Brien mushed ahead of the dogs, breaking out the trail with their rackets. Hour after hour they mushed, seeking to cross the great fissure that gaped wide and deep between them and the distant mountains that loomed white and grand against the western skyline—the mountains that separated them from Alaska, and through whose fastnesses they must find a trail.

The belated sun peeped over the rim of the flat snow tundra behind them, and all three turned to view the welcome sight. Suddenly, O'Brien, with a sharp cry, pointed toward some tiny moving objects far to the eastward:

"The Injuns," he cried. "That haythen, Lemlak—th' wan that seen us layve th' Ignatook—he's put um on our thr-rail—an' ut's back we go, av they don't har-rpoon us—as sur-re's me name's Pathrick O'Brien!"

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"It's back we *don't* go! And you can bet your bottom dollar on that!" cried Connie, as he glanced with flashing eyes toward the two high-power rifles lashed side by side against the rail of McDougall's sled. "Look! There's the end of the ravine! We can head west now, and hit for the mountains!"

"Sur-re, they'll ketch up to us, befoor we git foive moile—we've got to bre'k thr-rail, an' they'll folly along in ut."

They were drawing nearer to the white expanse that Connie had pointed out as the end of the ravine.

"Ut ain't th' ind! Ut's a shnow bridge!" exclaimed O'Brien, and the others saw, extending from side to side of the chasm, gleaming white in the slanting rays of the sun, an enormous snow arch.



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"Recklessly O'Brien rushed out upon the glittering span of snow while Connie and Waseche watched breathlessly."

Without waiting for a line, O'Brien rushed out upon the glittering span, while Connie and Waseche watched breathlessly. The great mass of snow that bridged the chasm looked as solid as the rock of Gibraltar, but the partners heaved a sigh of relief as the man reached the opposite side in safety and turned to retrace his steps. Connie's team, drawing the injured man, crossed first and was quickly followed by the two more heavily loaded sleds.

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"Now, let's hit for the mountains!" cried the boy, "we've got miles and miles on them yet."

"Hold on, son. We got lots of time, now. 'Spose yo' jes' bust open one of them theah bundles of wood an' staht us a little camp-fiah."

"A camp-fire!" exclaimed the boy, "why, it isn't time to camp! And, besides——"

"Neveh yo' mind about that. Jes' do as I said, an' then swing that theah pack of mine around heah an' prop me up agin' it beside the fiah. Afteh that, I want yo' an' O'Brien to take Mac's dawgs an' yo'n an' wo'k yo' way to the top of yondeh hill an' see if yo' c'n find out how fah this heah ravine runs—get busy, now."

The boy obeyed without question and soon he and the Irishman were headed for the hill a quarter of a mile up the ravine. [274]

"I wonder what he's up to?" speculated the boy, with puckered brow. "You don't suppose it's his leg—fever, or something, that's made him kind of—of queer?"

"No, no, lad. Oi don't know phwat's on his moind—but min loike him—they mostly knows phwat they're doin'—er they wouldn't be doin' ut."

From the top of the hill they saw that, as far as the eye could reach, the ravine cut the tundra in an unbroken line.

"They ain't no other cr-rossin'," said O'Brien, so they retraced their steps to the bridge, where they could see Waseche bending close over the tiny fire.

"Why, he's frying some meat!" exclaimed Connie, "and we just had breakfast!" They were close now, and Waseche removed a frying pan from the flame and poked gingerly at its contents with a piece of brushwood. Apparently satisfied, he placed it beside him upon the snow. Connie glanced into the pan where, instead of a caribou steak, the boy saw three yellow sticks of dynamite. [275]

"Why, you told me——!"

"Yes, kid, I done tol' yo' long ago, neveh to thaw out no giant in a pan—an' I meant it! Mos'ly, yo' c'n do it—if yo' careful—but, sometimes she jes' nachelly lets go, without no provocation, an' then—well, yo' rec'lect how we-all wiped po' Gus Meekin offen the bushes an' rocks, a half a mile from wheah his fiah was."

"But, you——"

"Hold on, son. This heah was a pahtic'lah case. I figgehed it all out—an' took a chanct. That's why I sent yo' an' O'Brien oveh onto the hill, so's if she let go they'd still be some of us left. Soon as I seen the bridge I rec'lected how I had a dozen sticks of giant in my outfit, an' a box of caps, an' some fuse—wait, now, till I set the caps, an' then yo' c'n touch off the shot. We'll use two sticks fust, an' save the otheh to finish off with, if we need it." As he talked Waseche Bill punched holes in the soft yellow cylinders and affixed the caps and fuse for a ten-minute shot. Connie and O'Brien placed the injured man again upon the sled and made ready for a quick getaway. [276]

"Lay 'em side by side right in the middle, an' coveh 'em with a couple handfuls of snow," advised Waseche, "an' then we'll pull out on the flat a space an' watch the fun. When them Injuns gets to the ravine it sho' will botheh 'em to figgeh how we-all got acrost."

A few minutes later they halted the outfit well out of harm's way and watched breathlessly for the explosion. The mining of the bridge had taken time and, in the distance, beyond the ravine, the White Indians were rapidly gaining. A few of the stronger and more fleet were well within rifle shot, when suddenly, with a dull roar and a blur of flying snow, the giant let go. The eyes of the three were fixed upon the bridge—or rather upon the place where the bridge had been—for all that remained was a cloud of powdery snow dust and a thinning haze of light grey smoke. The snow dust settled, the smoke drifted away and dissolved into the cold, clear air, and between the watchers and the White Indians the unbridged ravine yawned wide, and deep, and impassable. [277]

"Whoop-la!" yelled O'Brien, leaping into the air and cracking his heels together. "Come on an' git us, ye phirates!" And as the savages gathered upon the opposite side, the Irishman's laughter rang long and loud across the frozen tundra.

The third day after the blowing up of the bridge found the three adventurers skirting the base of the great white range that towered in an unbroken chain as far as the eye could reach to the northward and to the southward. Vast, and grim, and impassable, the giant masses of rock and ice loomed above them, their naked, blue-white peaks and pinnacles gleaming clean-cut and cold against the cloudless turquoise of the sky.

All day long the three dog teams mushed northward while Connie, and Waseche Bill, and O'Brien anxiously scanned the great barrier for signs of a river or creek that gave promise of leading to a divide. For, though they passed the mouths of dozens of creeks and canyons, none were sufficiently large to tempt exploration. [278]

Waseche Bill's injured leg was much swollen, for the trail was rough and tortuous, and despite the utmost efforts of Connie and O'Brien, the light sled bumped and slued against obstructions in a manner that caused the man excruciating torture, although neither by sign nor sound, did he betray the slightest pain. The Irishman and the boy took turns breaking trail for McDougall's leaders, and working at the gee-pole to ease the light sled over the rough places. Waseche's own dogs followed McDougall's, thus giving a smoother trail to the sled bearing the injured man.

The afternoon was well spent when Connie, who was in the rear, noticed a growing uneasiness among the dogs of Waseche's team. The big *malamutes* whined and whimpered with a peculiar suppressed eagerness as they eyed the mountains and, pulling close, tried time and again to pass [279]

the lead sled.

"That's funny," thought the boy, as he watched the dogs closely, "I never saw those dogs act like that before—seems like they wanted to lead." Hour after hour the boy mushed at the tail rope, and always he watched the strange behaviour of Waseche Bill's dogs. The sun sank behind the mountains and, at last, O'Brien halted at the edge of a patch of scraggy spruce. The dogs were unharnessed and fed, and after Waseche was made comfortable at the fireside, Connie prepared supper.

Suddenly, all three were startled by the long howl of a sled dog and, turning quickly saw Waseche's huge leader standing with up-pointing muzzle, upon a low hill, some fifty yards distant, and about him stood the seven dogs of his team. Again he howled, and then, as though this were the signal, the whole pack turned tail and dashed into the North.

"Well, of all the doggone, ornery tricks I eveh heached tell of—that takes the cake!" cried Waseche. "Pulled out on us! Jes' plumb pulled out! An' them's good dawgs, too!" [280]

"Where did you get that team?" asked Connie excitedly.

"Picked 'em up off a man in Eagle," answered Waseche. "He aimed to go outside, come spring. He got 'em off a breed, a yeah back."

"Where do you s'pose they've gone?" asked the boy.

"Sea'ch me! I cain't onde'stand it."

"Ut's th' Lillimuit!" croaked O'Brien. "Ut wuz th' same wid Craik an' Greenhow!" The man shuddered and drew closer to the fire. "They's things here that ondy some c'n see! An' phwin they see um—always they head into th' Narth!"

"Sho'! Quit yo' calamatin', O'Brien! Dawgs has pulled out on folks befo'."

"Thim wans ain't," returned the Irishman, and relapsed into gloomy silence.

With the first sign of dawn the outfit was again on the trail. The bulk of the pack had been removed from Waseche's sled and added to the other two, and the sled and harness *cached* in the bush. For several miles Connie, who was travelling in the lead, followed the trail of the stampeded dog-pack, when suddenly he paused where a narrow creek canyon clove the rock-wall of a mountain. The trail led into the gorge, which appeared to be a mere crack in the mighty wall. [281]

"Follow 'em up, son!" called Waseche from his sled. "We need them dawgs."

So the boy swung McDougall's team into the canyon, and his own dogs followed, with O'Brien fast to the tail rope. On and on led the narrow trail—westward, and upward, winding and twisting between its rocky walls—but always westward, and upward. The floor was surprisingly smooth for so narrow a trail, and the outfit made good time, but all three expected that each turn would be the last, and that they would find the runaway dogs huddled against a dead end. Toward midday, the canyon grew lighter, the walls seemed not so high, and the ascent grew steeper. Suddenly, as they rounded a sharp turn, a brilliant patch of sunlight burst upon them, and the next moment they found themselves upon the summit of a long divide. [282]

Never in their lives had any of the three gazed upon so welcome a sight, for there, to the westward, lay an unending chaos of high-flung peaks and narrow valleys, and easily traceable—leading in a broad path of white to the south-westward, was the smooth trail of a river!

"The Kandik!" cried Connie, "and *Alaska*!"

"H-o-o-r-a-y!" yelled O'Brien, dancing about in the snow, while the tears streamed unheeded from his eyes. "Ut's good-bye Lillimuit, foriver! Av ye wuz pure gold from th' middle av th' wor-rl'd to th' peak av ye're hoighest hill, Oi w'dn't niver go no closter thin th' furthest away Oi c'd git from ye! A-h-r-o-o! Wid ye're dead min—an' ye're cowl'd!"

CHAPTER XIX

ON THE KANDIK

To the conqueror of far places comes disaster in many guises—to the sailor who sails the uncharted seas, and to the adventurer who pushes past the outposts into the unmapped land of the long snow trails. For the lone, drear lands are lands of primal things—lands rugged and grim, where life is the right of the strongest and only the fit survive.

Men die when ships, in the grip of the fierce hurricane, are buried beneath crashing waves or dashed against the rocks of a towering cliff; and men die in blizzards and earthquakes and in the belching fire of volcanoes and amid the roar and smoke of burning forests—but these men *expect* to die. They match their puny strength against the mighty fury of the elements and meet death gladly—or win through to glory in the adventure. Such battles with the giants of nature strike no horror to the hearts of men—they are recounted with a laugh. Not so the death that lurks where [284]

nature smiles. Calm waters beneath their sparkling surface conceal sharp fangs of rock that rip the bottom from an unsuspecting ship; a beautiful mirage paints upon the shimmering horizon a picture of cool, green shade and crystal pools, and thirst-choked men are lured farther into the springless desert; the smooth, velvety surface of quicksand pits and "soap-holes" beguiles the unsuspecting feet of the weary traveller; and the warm Chinook wind softens the deep snow beneath a smiling winter sky. In all these things is death—a sardonic, derisive death that lurks unseen and unsuspected for its prey. But the claws of the tiger are none the less sharp because concealed between soft pads. And the men who win through the unseen death never recount their story with a laugh. These men are silent. Or, if they speak at all, it is in low, tense tones, with clenched fists, and many pauses between the words, and into their eyes creeps the look of unveiled horror.

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Connie Morgan, Waseche Bill, and O'Brien laboriously worked the outfit down the steep trail that led from the divide to the snow-buried surface of the Kandik. The distance, in an air line, was possibly three miles—by the steep and winding caribou trail it was ten. And each mile was a mile of gruelling toil with axe and shovel and tail-rope and brake-pole, for the snow lay deep upon the trail which twisted and doubled interminably, narrowing in places to a mere shelf high upon the side of a sheer rock wall. At such spots Connie and O'Brien took turns with axe and shovel, heaving the snow into the canyon; for to venture upon the drifts, high-piled upon the edge of the precipice, would have been to invite instant disaster.

Waseche Bill, despite the pain of his broken leg, insisted upon being propped into position to brake his own sled. It was the heavier sled, double-freighted by reason of the stampede of Waseche's dogs, that caused Connie and O'Brien the hardest labour; for its loss meant death by exposure and starvation.

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Night overtook them with scarce half the distance behind them, and they camped on a small plateau overlooking a deep ravine.

Morning found them again at their work in the face of a stiff gale from the south-west. The sun rose and hung low in the cloudless sky above the sea of gleaming white peaks. The mercury expanded in the tube of the thermometer and the wind lost its chill. Connie and O'Brien removed their heavy *parkas*, and Waseche Bill threw back his hood and frowned uneasily:

"Sho' wisht this heah Chinook w'd helt off about ten days mo'," he said. "I ain't acquainted through heah, but I reckon nine oah ten days had ort to put us into Eagle if the snow holds."

"It's too early for the break-up!" exclaimed Connie.

"Yeh, fo' the break-up, it is. But these heah Chinooks yo' cain't count on. I've saw three foot of snow melt in a night an' a day—an' then tuhn 'round an' freeze up fo' two months straight. If this heah wind don't shift oah die down again tomorrow mo'nin', we ah goin' to have to hole up an' wait fo' a freeze."

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"The grub won't hold out long," ventured Connie, eyeing the sled. "But there must be game on this side of the divide."

"They betteh be! I sho' do hate it—bein' crippled up this-a-way an' leavin' yo'-all to do the wo'k."

"Niver 'yez moind about that!" exclaimed O'Brien. "Sur-re, we'd all be wor-rkin' as har-rd as we could an-nyways, an' ut w'dn't make ut no aisyer f'r us bekase ye was wor-rkin', too. Jist set ye by an' shmoke yer poipe, an' me an' th' b'y'll have us on th' river be noon."

By dint of hard labour and much snubbing and braking, O'Brien's prediction was fulfilled and the midday meal was eaten upon the snow-covered ice of the Kandik.

"All aboard for Eagle!" cried Connie, as he cracked his long-lashed whip and led out upon the broad river trail. And McDougall's big *malamutes* as though they understood the boy's words, humped to the pull and the heavily loaded sled slipped smoothly over the surface of the softening snow. Upon the trail from the divide, protected from wind and sun by high walls, the snow had remained stiff and hard, but here on the river the sled runners left deep ruts behind them, and not infrequently slumped through, so that Connie and O'Brien were forced to stop and pry them out, and also to knock the balls of packed snow from the webs of their rackets.

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"Saints be praised, ut's a house!" called O'Brien, as toward evening he halted at a sharp bend of the river and pointed toward a tiny cabin that nestled in a grove of balsam at the edge of the high cut-bank.

"Ut's th' fur-rst wan Oi've seed in six year—barrin' thim haythen *igloos* av' dhrift-wood an' shnow blocks! We'll shtay th' night wid um, whoiver they ar-re—an' happy Oi'll be wid a Christian roof over me head wanst more!"

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The outfit was headed for the cabin and a quarter of an hour later they swung into the small clearing before the door.

"Them dawgs has be'n heah," remarked Waseche Bill, as he eyed the trodden snow. "Don't reckon nobody's to home." O'Brien pushed open the door and entered, closely followed by Connie.

Save for a rude bunk built against the wall, and a rusted sheet-iron stove, the cabin was empty, and despite the peculiar musty smell of an abandoned building, the travellers were glad to avail themselves of its shelter. Waseche Bill was made comfortable with robes and blankets, and while

O'Brien unharnessed the dogs and rustled the firewood, Connie unloaded the outfit and carried it inside. The sun had long set, but with the withdrawal of its heat the snow had not stiffened and the wind held warm.

"Betteh let in the dawgs, tonight, son," advised Waseche, "I'm 'fraid we ah in fo' a thaw. Still it mout tuhn cold in the night an' freeze 'em into the snow." [290]

"How long will it last—the thaw?" asked the boy, as he eyed the supply of provisions.

"Yo' cain't tell. Two days—me'be three—sometimes a week—then, anyway, one day mo', till she freezes solid."

"O'Brien and I will have to hunt then—grub's getting low."

"We'll see how it looks tomorrow. If it's like I think, yo' ain't a-goin' to be able to get fah to do no huntin'. The snow'll be like mush."

As O'Brien tossed the last armful upon his pile of firewood, Connie announced supper, and the three ate in silence—as hungry men eat.

Worn out by the long, hard day on the trail, all slept soundly, and when they awoke it was to find the depressions in the dirt floor filled with water which entered through a crack beneath the door.

"We-all ah sho' 'nough tied up, now," exclaimed Waseche, as he eyed the tiny trickle. "How much grub we got?" Connie explored the pack. [291]

"Three or four days. We better cut the dogs to half-ration."

"Them an' us, both," replied the man in the bunk, and groaned as a hot pain shot through his injured leg.

Breakfast over, Connie picked up his rifle, fastened on his snowshoes, and stepped on the wind-softened snow. He had taken scarcely a half-dozen steps when he was forced to halt—anchored fast in the soggy snow. In vain he tried to raise first one foot and then the other—it was no use. The snow clung to his rackets in huge balls and after repeated efforts he loosened the thongs and stepped on the melting snow, into which he promptly sank to his middle. He freed his rackets, tossed them toward the cabin, and wallowed to the door.

"Back a'ready?" grinned Waseche. "How's the huntin'?" Connie laughed.

"You wait—I haven't started yet!"

"Betteh keep inside, son. Yo' cain't do no good out theah. They cain't no game move in a thaw like this." [292]

"Rabbits and ground squirrels and ptarmigan can," answered the boy.

"Yeh—but yo' cain't!"

"I'm not going far. I'm wet now, and I'm not going to give up without trying." Three hours later he stumbled again through the door, bearing proudly a bedraggled ptarmigan and a lean ground squirrel, each neatly beheaded by a bullet from his high-power rifle. As he dried his clothing beside the rusty stove, the boy dressed his game, carefully dividing the offal between old Boris, Mutt, and Slasher, and the dogs greedily devoured it to the last hair and feather.

"Every little bit helps," he smiled. "But it sure is a little bit of meat for such a lot of work. I bet I didn't get a quarter of a mile away."

For three days the wind held, the sun shone, and the snow melted. Streams forced their way to the river and the surface of the Kandik became a raging torrent—a river on top of a river! Each day Connie hunted faithfully, sometimes in vain, but generally his efforts were rewarded by a ptarmigan, or a brace of lank snowshoe rabbits or ground squirrels, lured from their holes by the feel of the false spring. [293]

On the fourth night it turned cold, and in the morning the snow was crusted over sufficiently to support a man's weight on the rackets. The countless tiny rills that supplied the river were dried and the flood subsided and narrowed to the middle of the stream, while upon the edges the slush and anchor-ice froze rough and uneven.

Waseche Bill's injured leg was much swollen and caused him great pain, but he bore it unflinchingly and laughed and joked gaily. But Connie was not deceived, for from the little fan of wrinkles at the corners of the man's eyes, and the hard, drawn look about his mouth, the boy knew that his big partner suffered intensely even while his lips smiled and his words fell lightly in droll banter.

Thanks to the untiring efforts of the boy, their supply of provisions remained nearly intact, his rifle supplying the meat for their frugal meals. For two days past, O'Brien had brooded in silence, sitting for hours at a time with his back against the log wall and his gaze fixed, now upon the wounded man, and again upon the boy, or the great shaggy *malamutes* that lay sprawled upon the floor. He did his full share of the work: chopped the firewood, washed the dishes, and did whatever else was necessary about the camp while Connie hunted. But when he had finished he lapsed into a gloomy reverie, during which he would speak no word. [294]

With the return of cold weather, the dogs had been expelled from the cabin and had taken up their quarters close beside the wall at the back.

"Me'be tomorrow we c'n hit the trail," said Waseche, as he noticed that the sun of the fourth day failed to soften the stiffening crust.

"We ought to make good time, now!" exclaimed the boy. But Waseche shook his head.

"No, son, we won't make no good time the way things is. The trail is rough an' the sha'p ice'll cut the dawg's feet so they'll hate to pull. Likewise, yo'n an' O'Brien's—them *mukluks* won't last a day, an' the sleds'll be hahd to manage, sluein' sideways an' runnin' onto the dawgs. I've ice-trailed befo' now, an' it's wo'se even than soft snow. If yo' c'n travel light so yo' c'n ride an' save yo' feet an' keep the dawgs movin' fast, it ain't so bad—but mushin' slow, like we got to, an' sho't of grub besides—" The man shook his head dubiously and relapsed into silence, while, with his back against the wall, O'Brien listened and hugged closer his cans of gold.

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CHAPTER XX

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THE DESERTER

Connie Morgan opened his eyes and blinked sleepily. Then, instantly he became wide awake, with a strange, indescribable feeling that all was not well. Waseche Bill stirred uneasily in his sleep and through the cracks about the edges of the blanket-hung window and beneath the door a dull grey light showed. The boy frowned as he tossed back his robes and drew on his *mukluks*. This was the day they were to hit the trail and O'Brien should have had the fire going and called him early. Suddenly the boy paused and stared hard at the cold stove, and then at the floor beside the stove—at the spot where O'Brien's blankets and robes should have shown an untidy heap in the dull light of morning. Lightning-like, his glance flew to the place at the base of the wall where the Irishman kept his gold—but the blankets and robes were gone, and the gold was gone, and O'Brien—? Swiftly the boy flew to the door—the big sled was missing, the harness, and McDougall's dogs were gone, and O'Brien was nowhere to be seen!

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For a long, long time the boy stood staring out over the dim trail of the river and then with clenched fists he stepped again into the room. A hurried inspection of the pack showed that the man had taken most of the remaining fish and considerable of the food, also Waseche Bill's rifle was missing from its place in the far corner. With tight-pressed lips, Connie laid the fire in the little stove and watched dumbly as the tiny yellow sparks shot upward past the holes in the rusty pipe. Vainly the mind of the boy strove to grasp the situation, but his lips formed only the words which he repeated over and over again, as if seeking their import:

"He's gone—he's gone—O'Brien's gone." He could not understand it. Among the dwellers in the great white land the boy had known only men whose creed was to stick together until the end. From the hour he first set foot upon the dock at Anvik, to this very moment, with the single exception of the little rat-faced man at Ten Bow, the boy had learned to love the big men of the North—men whose vices were rugged vices—flaunting and unashamed and brutish, perhaps—but men, any one of whom would face privation, want, and toil—death itself—with a laugh in his teeth for the privilege of helping a friend—and who would fight to divide his last ounce of bacon with his enemy. For not by rule of life—but life itself men live upon the edges of the world, where little likes and hates are forgotten, and all stand shoulder to shoulder against their common enemy—the North! These were the men the boy had known. And now, for the first time, he was confronted by another kind of man—a man so yellow that, rather than face the perils and hardships of the trail, he had deserted those who had rescued him from a band of savages—and not only deserted, but had taken with him the only means by which the others could hope to reach civilization, and had left a wounded man and a little boy to die in the wilderness—bushed!

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The dull soul-hurt of the boy flashed into swift anger and, flinging open the door, he shook a small fist toward the south.



"My dad followed British Kronk eight hundred miles through the snow

before he caught him—and then—you just wait."

"You cur!" he shouted. "You dirty cur! You *piker!* You think you've fixed us—but you wait! They say my dad followed British Kronk eight hundred miles through the snow before he caught him—and then—you *just wait!* You tried to starve Waseche!"

"Heah! Heah! What's all this?" asked the man, who had raised himself to his elbow upon the bunk. The boy faced him: [300]

"He's beat it!" he choked. "He swiped Mac's dogs and breezed!" for a moment the man stared uncomprehendingly:

"Yo' mean O'Brien—he's *gone?*"

"Yes, he's gone! And so are the dogs, and the sled, and your rifle, and his robes, and his gold!"

"How about the grub?" asked Waseche. "Did he take that, too?"

"Only about a third of it—he's travelling light." For a fleeting instant the boy caught the gleam of Waseche's eyes, and then the gleam was gone and the man's lips smiled.

"Sho', now," he drawled. "Sho', now." The drawl was studied, and the voice was low and very steady—too low and steady, thought the boy—and shivered.

"Neveh yo' mind, son. We-all ah all right. Jest yo' keep on a huntin' an' a fetchin' in rabbits an' ptarmigan, an' such like, an' now the snow's hahdened, me'be yo'll get a crack at a moose oah a caribou. The heahd ort to pass somewehs neah heah soon. We'll jest lay up heah an' wait fo' the break-up, an' then we'll build us a raft an' go akitin' down to the Yukon—an' then—" The voice suddenly hardened, and again the gleam was in the grey eyes, but the man ceased speaking abruptly. [301]

"And then—what?" asked Connie, as he studied his partner's face. The man laughed.

"Why, then—then we-all c'n go back to Ten Bow—to *home!* But, come now, le's eat breakfast. We-all got to go light on the grub. Come on out of that, yo' li'l ol' *tillicum*, standin' theah in the do' shakin' yo' fist! Puts me in mind of a show I seen onct down to Skagway, in the opery house: Julia See's Ah, I rec'lect was the name of it, an' they was a lot of fist shakin' an' fancy speeches by the men, which they was Greasers oah Dagoes that woah sheets wropped around 'em, 'stead of pants an' shirts. They was one fellow, See's Ah, his name was—it was him the show was about. Neah as we-all c'd figgeh, he was a mighty good soht of a pahty, a king oah pres'dent, oah somethin', an' he had a friend, name of Brutish, that he'd done a heap fo', an' helped along, an' thought a heap of; an' anotheh friend name of Mahk Antony. Well, seems like this heah Brutish got soah at See's Ah, I didn't rightly get what fo'—but it don't make no dif'ence—anyhow, he got a fellow name of Cashus, an' a couple mo' scoundrels an' they snuck up on See's Ah when he worn't lookin' an' stabbed him in the back. It sho' made us mad, an' we-all yelled at See's Ah to look out, 'cause we seen 'em fingehein' theah knives in undeh theah sheets—but he didn't get what we was drivin' at, an' when he did look it was too late. We waited a spell while the show went on, to see what Mahk Antony, See's Ah's otheh friend, w'd do to Brutish an' his gang—but he jest hung around makin' fancy speeches an' such-like until we-all got plumb disgusted." Waseche Bill paused until Connie, who had been listening eagerly, grew impatient. [302]

"Well, what *did* he do?" [303]

"Nawthin'," replied the man. "We done it fo' him. Cou'se, it was only a show, an' they didn't really kill See's Ah, but we-all didn't like the idee, an' so when we seen Mahk didn't aim to do nawthin' but orate, we-all let a yell out of us an' run up the aisle an' clim' onto the stage an' grabbed Brutish an' Cashus an' Mahk Antony, too, an' run 'em down an' chucked 'em into the Lynn Canal. It was winteh, an' the wateh was cold, an' we soused 'em good an' propkeh, an' when they got out they snuck onto theah boat an' we-all went back to the opery house an' got See's Ah, an' tuck him oveh to the *hotel* an' give him a rousin' big suppeh an' told him how we was all fo' him an' he c'd count on a squeah deal in Skagway every time. An' Grub Stake John Billin's give him a six-shooteh an' showed him how he c'd hide it in undeh his sheet an' lay fo' 'em next time they snuck up on him that-a-way. See's Ah thanked us all an' we walked down to the boat with him in case Brutish an' his gang aimed to waylay him. An' then he made us a fine speech an' went on up the gangway laughin' an' chucklin' fit to kill at the way he'd suhprise them theah assinatehs next time they ondehtook to stick him in the back." Waseche Bill finished, and after a long pause Connie asked: [304]

"And O'Brien reminds you of Brutish?"

"Yes, son. An' I was jest a wondehin' what the boys'll do to him down in Eagle when they see Mac's dawgs, an' ask him how come he to have 'em, an' wheah yo' an' me is at. Yo' see, son, Big Jim Sontag an' Joe an' Fiddle Face, an' a lot mo' of the boys was down to Skagway that night."

In the little cabin on the Kandik the days dragged slowly by. Waseche's leg mended slowly, and despite the boy's most careful attention, remained swollen and discoloured. Connie hunted during every minute of daylight that could be spared from his camp duties, but game was scarce, and although the boy tramped miles and miles each day, his bag was pitifully small. A snowbird or a ptarmigan now and then fell to his rifle and he found that it required the utmost care to keep from blowing his game to atoms with the high-power rifle. How he longed for a shotgun or a twenty-two calibre rifle as he dragged himself wearily over the hard crust of the snow. The cold weather [305]

had driven the ground squirrels into their holes and even the rabbits stuck close to cover. The boy set snares made from an old piece of fishline, but the night-prowling wolverines robbed them, as the line was too rotten for jerk snares.

The partners were reduced to one meal a day, now, and that a very scanty one. Day after day the boy circled into the woods, and day by day the circle shortened. He was growing weak, and was forced often to rest, and the buckle tongue of his belt rested in a knife slit far beyond the last hole.

Tears stood in Waseche Bill's eyes as each day he noted that the little face was thinner and whiter than upon the preceding day, and that the little shoulders drooped lower as the boy returned from his hunt and sat wearily down upon the floor to pluck the feathers from a small snowbird. [306]

On the morning of the tenth day, Connie bravely shouldered his rifle and with a cheery "Good-bye, pardner" carefully closed the door behind him. Old Boris, Mutt, and Slasher had managed to eke out a scant living by running rabbits at night, but they were little more than skin and bones, at best, and during the day lay huddled together in the sunshine near the cabin. As the boy passed out into the cold, clear air he noticed that the dogs were gone from their accustomed place.

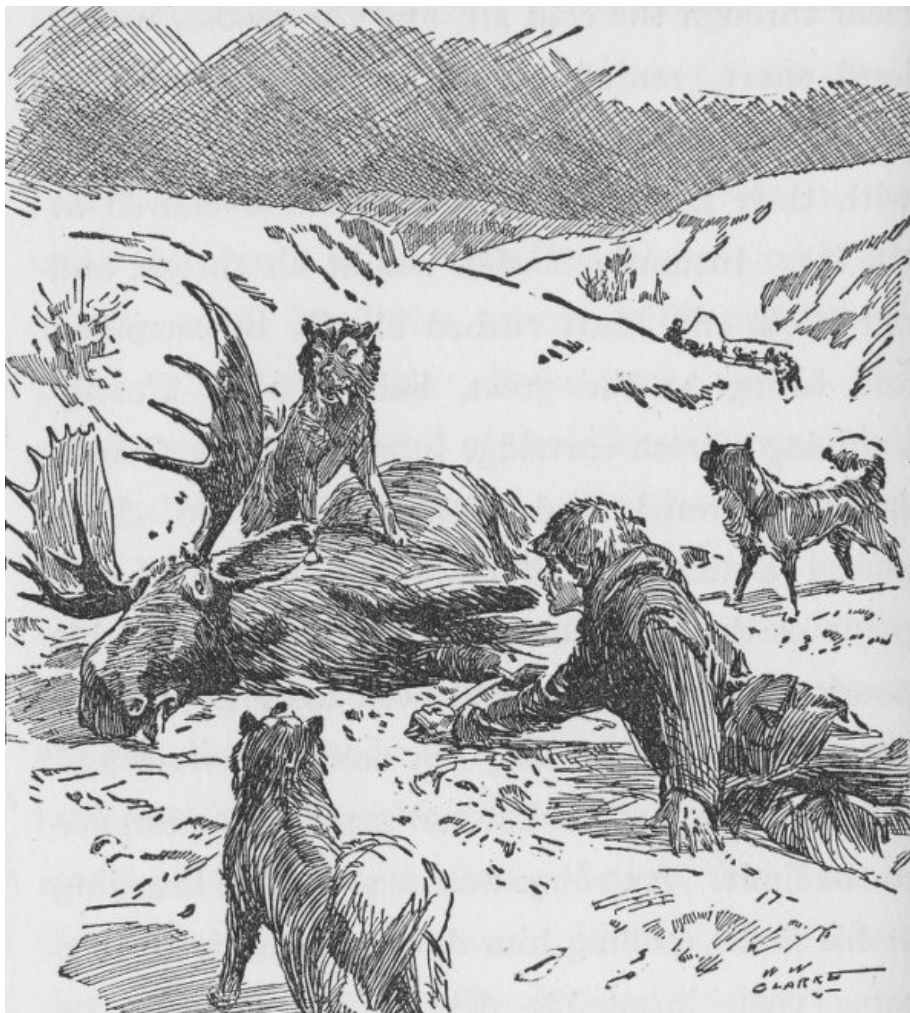
"That's funny," he thought. "I wonder if they pulled out, too?" And then, as if ashamed of the thought, he jerked his shoulders erect. "Not by a long shot! Those dogs will stick with us till the end! They are no pikers! They're *tillicums*!"

Suddenly, from far down the river, came a clear, bell-like howl, followed by a chorus of frantic yelps and savage growls.

"My dogs!" cried the boy and, gripping his rifle, made his way down the steep bank and out upon the hard crust of the river. On and on he ran, in the direction of the sounds that came from beyond a sharp, wooded bend. The ice was slippery but uneven, and studded with sharp points of frozen snow that cut cruelly into his feet through the holes of his worn *mukluks*. In his weakened condition the effort was a serious drain upon the boy's strength, but he kept on running, stumbling, slipping—and in more places than one his footsteps were marked by dark patches of red. Around the wooded bend he tore and there, upon the smooth ice of a backwater pool, stood a huge bull moose, which, with lowered antlers and bristling mane, fought off the savage attacks of the three dogs. Again and again the dogs charged the great animal, whose hoofs slipped clumsily upon the ice with each movement of the huge body. Round and round they circled, seeking a chance to dash in past those broad antlers, but with blazing eyes the moose faced them, turning swiftly but awkwardly, as upon an uncentred pivot, while the breath whistled through his distended nostrils and spread into frozen plumes. So intent was the great beast upon the attack of the dogs that he gave no heed to the small boy who gazed spellbound upon this battle of the wilds. For a long time Connie stood, entirely forgetful of the rifle that remained firmly clutched in his hands, and as he watched, a wave of admiration and sympathy swept over him for this huge monarch of the barren lands that, in his own fastnesses, stood at bay against the gleaming white fangs of his tormentors. Then into his brain leaped another thought—here was meat! Half a ton of good red meat that meant life to his starving partner, to himself, and to his three beloved dogs. Slowly and deliberately the boy dropped to his knee and raised his rifle. The sights wavered to the trembling of his hands and, summoning all the power that was in him, he concentrated upon the steadying of his aim. [307]

Bang! The sound of the shot rang sharp and clear through the cold air, and the moose, with a loud snort, reared upward, whirled, and fell crashing upon his side, while his powerful legs, with their sharp hoofs, thrashed and clawed at the ice. Instantly Slasher was at his throat, and old Boris and Mutt rushed blindly in, snapping and biting at the great, hairy body. Hastily jamming a fresh cartridge into his barrel, Connie sprang forward, and with muzzle held close, placed a finishing shot low down behind the point of the shoulder. But the strain upon his poorly nourished body had been too great for the boy to stand. The long run down the river and the excitement of the kill had taxed his endurance to the limit. A strange weakness seemed dragging at his limbs, pulling him down, down, down into some vast, intangible depth. Mechanically he drew the knife from its sheath and dragged himself to the body of the moose, and then, suddenly, the world went dark, and he seemed to be whirling, easily and slowly, into a place of profound silence. And almost at the same moment, around another [309]

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"Mechanically he drew the knife from its sheath and dragged himself to the body of the moose."

bend of the river, from the direction of the Yukon, dashed a long, tawny dog team, and another, and another, and with a wild yell of joy, O'Brien, red whiskers ablaze in the sunlight, leaped from the foremost sled and gathered the unconscious form of the boy into his arms; while beside him, all talking at once and hampering each other's movements in their frantic efforts to revive the boy, were Fiddle Face, and Joe, and Big Jim Sontag, and others of the men of Eagle. [311]

Slowly Connie Morgan opened his eyes and gazed, puzzled, into the bearded faces of the men of the North. His glance rested upon the face of O'Brien peering anxiously into his own, and strayed to the dogs of the leading team—McDougall's dogs—and to the sleds loaded with provisions, and then, with the tears streaming from his eyes, the boy struggled to his feet and a small hand shot out and grasped the rough, hairy hand of O'Brien—the deserter who came back!

CHAPTER XXI

[312]

MISTER SQUIGG

It was a jovial gathering that crowded the little cabin on the Kandik where the men of the North feasted until far into the night, and told tales, and listened to wondrous adventures in the gold country. But most eagerly they listened to Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill, with their marvellous tales of the Lillimuit—and Carlson's cans of gold.

"We've a yarn worth the tellin' ourself!" exclaimed the man called Joe—the man who tried to dissuade Waseche Bill and prevent Connie Morgan from venturing into the unknown. "Ye sh'd o' seen 'em come! Flat on his belly a-top the sled—an' the dogs runnin' low an' true! A bunch of us was watchin' the trail fr Black Jack Demaree an' the Ragged Falls mail: 'Here he comes!' someone yells, an' way down the river we seen a speck—a speck that grow'd until it was a dog team an' a man. *Jeerushelam*, but he was a-comin'! 'Twornt no time till he was clost enough to see 'twornt Black Jack. A cold day, it was—reg'lar bitin', nippin' cold—with the wind, an' the sweep o' the river. An' here come the team on the high lope, an' a-whippin' along behind 'em, the lightest loaded outfit man ever seen hauled—jest a man, an' a blanket, an' two tomaters cans. Flat, he laid—low to the sweep o' the wind, one arm around the cans, an' the other a-holdin' onto the sled fr all he was worth. The man was O'Brien, yonder; an' up the bank he shot, fair burnin' the snow, whirled amongst us, an' piled the outfit up ag'in' Big Jim's stockade. The nex' we know'd was a yell from Fiddle Face, here: [313]

"It's McDougall's dogs!' An' before the Irishman c'd get onto his feet, Fiddle Face was a-top him with a hand at his throat. 'Where's the kid?' he howls in O'Brien's ear, 'Where's Sam Morgan's boy?' Fiddle Face's voice ain't no gentle murmur—when he yells. But the rest of us didn't hear it—us that was ontanglin' the dogs. F'r, in the mix-up, the cover had come off one of them tomater cans, an' there on the snow was nuggets o' *gold*—jest a-layin' there dull an' yaller, in a heap on the top o' the snow." Joe paused, held a sputtering sulphur match to the bowl of his pipe, and, after a few deep puffs, continued: "Ye know how the sight o' raw gold, that-a-way, gets *to ye*—when ye've put in the best an' the hardest years o' yer life a-grubbin' an' a-gougin' f'r it? Ye know the feelin' that comes all to onct about yer belt line, an' how yer head feels sort o' light, an' yer face burns, an' ye want to holler, an' laugh, an' cry all to onct? Well, that was us, a-standin' there by the stockade—all but Fiddle Face. Him an' O'Brien was a-wallerin' grip-locked in the snow, an' Fiddle Face was a-hollerin' over an' over ag'in: 'Where's that kid? Where's that kid?' an' all the while a-chokin' of O'Brien so's he couldn't answer. Presen'ly we noticed 'em an' drug 'em apart. An' right then every man jack o' us forgot the gold. F'r, on a sudden, we remembered that little kid—the gameness of him—an' how he'd give us the slip an' took off alone into a country we didn't none o' us dast to go to—way long in the fore part o' the winter. We jerked O'Brien to his feet an' hustled him into the *hotel*, an' by that time he'd got back his wind, an' he was a-tellin', an' a-beggin' us not to lose no time, but to pack a outfit an' hit f'r a little cabin on the Kandik. 'He's there!' he hollers. 'An' his pardner, too! They're starvin'. I've got the gold to pay f'r the grub—take it! Take it all! Only git back to 'em! I know'd we all couldn't make it, travellin' heavy an' slow with the outfit an' a crippled man to boot.'

"Big Jim Sontag goes out an' scoops up the gold where it laid *forgot*—an' then he comes back into the room an' walks straight over to where O'Brien was a-standin': 'We'll go!' says Jim, '*an' you'll go, too!* An', if there's a cabin, like you say, an' they're there, why *you* can't spend no gold in Eagle!' Jim steps closter—so clost that his nose stops within two inches of O'Brien's, an' his eyes a-borin' clean through to the back of O'Brien's head: 'But if they *ain't* there,' he says, low an' quiet like, '*then you don't spend no gold in Eagle, neither—see?* An' then Jim turns to us: 'Who'll go 'long?' he hollers. 'That there boy is Sam Morgan's boy—we all know'd Sam Morgan!' We sure did—an' we like to tore Jim's roof off a-signifyin'. Then, we slung our outfits together an' hit the trail. An' now, boys," Joe rose to his feet and crossed to the bunk where the Irishman sat between Connie and Waseche Bill, "it's up to us to signify onct more." And, for the first time in his life, O'Brien, whose lot in the world had always been an obscure and a lowly one, came to know something of what it meant to have earned the regard of *men!*

The journey down the Kandik was uneventful, and four days later the reinforced outfit camped at the junction of the lesser river with the mighty Yukon. Late that night the men of the North sat about the camp fire and their talk was of rich strikes, and stampedes, and the unsung deeds of men.

Connie Morgan listened with bated breath to tales of his father. Waseche Bill learned from the lips of the men of Eagle of the boy's escape from the hotel, and of his dash for the Lillimuit that ended, so far as the men who followed were concerned, at the foot of the snow-piled Tatonduk divide. And the men of Eagle learned of the Lillimuit, and the white Indians, and of the death of Carlson, and lastly, of the Ignatook, the steaming creek with its floor of gold.

"An' we-all ah goin' back theah, sometime," concluded Waseche. "Me an' the kid, heah, an' O'Brien, if he'll go—" To their surprise, O'Brien leaped to his feet:

"Ye c'n count me in!" he cried. "Foive days agone no power on earth c'd av dhrug me back into that land av th' cheerless cowl'd. But, now, 'tis dif'runt, an' if th' sun shoines war-rum enough f'r th' loikes av ye—an' th' b'y, here—phy, ut shoines war-rum enough f'r Pathrick O'Brien—av ut river shoines at all."

"That's what I call a man!" yelled Fiddle Face, and subsided instantly, for Waseche Bill was speaking.

"As I was goin' on to say: with us will be some of the boys from Ten Bow—McDougall, an' Dutch Henery, an' Dick Colton, an' Scotty McCollough, an' Black Jack Demaree from Ragged Falls, an'—well, how about it, boys? The gold is theah, an' me an' the kid, we aim to let ouh frien's in on this heah strike. We'll sho' be proud to have yo'-all jine us." With a loud cheer, the men accepted Waseche's invitation—they had seen O'Brien's gold.

"Jes' keep it undeh yo' hats till the time comes," cautioned Waseche. "We-all will slip yo'-all the wehd, an' we don't want no tinhawns, noah *chechakos*, noah pikehs along, 'cause the Ignatook stampede is goin' to be a stampede of *tillicums!*"

In the morning the partners, accompanied by O'Brien, said good-bye to the men of Eagle and headed down the great river for the mouth of the Ten Bow. On the third day, only a short distance above the place where the Ten Bow trail swerved from the Yukon between two high bluffs, they came upon the camp of an Indian. The red man was travelling light. He had just come out of the hills, and with him were Waseche Bill's dogs—the *malamutes* whose sudden stampede had led the lost wayfarers through the narrow pass to the crest of the Kandik divide, and—Alaska!

"Wheah'd yo' get them dawgs?" asked Waseche, pointing to the *malamutes*. The Indian waved his arm in the direction of the hills, and Waseche nodded:

"Them's *my* dawgs—*nika komooks*."

The Indian scowled and shook his head.

"Dem Pete Mateese dog," he grunted surlily.

"Pete Mateese!" cried Connie. "Do you know Pete Mateese? Who is he? Where is he? We want to find him."

The Indian glowered sullenly.

"W'at y'u wan' Pete Mateese?" he asked.

"We want to find him. We've got good news for him. He's rich—plenty gold." At the words the Indian laughed—not a mirthful laugh, but a sneering, sardonic laugh of unbelief. [320]

"White man beeg liar—all. Pete Mateese, she Injun—breed. White man no tell Injun 'bout gol'. Me'be so white man steal Injun gol'."

With Irish impetuosity, O'Brien leaped forward.

"Take thot back, ye rid shpalpeen!" he cried, shaking a huge fist under the Indian's nose. "Av ye say wan more wor-rd ag'in' th' b'y, Oi'll choke th' gizzard out av ye befoor ye say ut!"

Waseche Bill held up a restraining hand.

"Take it easy, O'Brien, don't le's nobody huht anybody. Le's get the straight of this heah. Primary an' fo'most, we-all want to find out if Pete Mateese *pulled out* on Carlson, oah, did he aim to go back." At the mention of Carlson's name the Indian turned quickly toward Waseche.

"Y'u know Carlson?" he asked. Waseche Bill nodded.

"Yeh, I did know him." [321]

"Wher' Carlson?"

"Dead." As Waseche pronounced the word the Indian shook his head sadly.

"Carlson good white man. All good white man dead. Sam Morgan, she dead, too."

"Sam Morgan!" exclaimed Connie. "What do you know of Sam Morgan?"

"Sam Morgan good to Injun. Me—mos' die, once—fi', seex winter 'go, in de beeg snow. Sam Morgan com' 'long. Hav' one small piece bacon—one small lump suet—eighteen mile—Hesitation. Me—I got no grub. Fi', seex day I ain' got no grub. Seek lak leetle baby. Sam Morgan, she mak' me eat—sam' lak heem. Den she peek me oop an' car' me—all night—all day. Nex' night, me'be so we no mak'. See de light in leetle cabin, an' den we com' Hesitation. Bot' of us, we pret' near die. An' Sam Morgan, she laugh." The old Indian paused and regarded the boy curiously: "Y'u know Sam Morgan?" he asked. The boy's eyes were very bright, and he cleared his throat huskily.

"Sam Morgan was my father," he said, in a low, unsteady tone. The Indian stalked to the boy and, pausing directly before him, lifted the small chin and gazed long and searchingly into the upturned grey eyes. [322]

"Uh-huh," he grunted, "y'u Sam Morgan boy. Me hear 'bout y'u in Ten Bow."

"Where is Pete Mateese?" persisted Connie. The Indian no longer hesitated.

"Pete Mateese, she Ten Bow. Work hard for de money to buy grub an' tak' back to Carlson—way back, pas' de divide, in de lan' of Niju Tah—de lan' of de bad man, dead. But, she don' git no money. Meestaire Squeeg, she cheat Pete Mateese."

"Who is Misteh Squigg?" asked Waseche Bill.

"Meestaire Squeeg she leetle man. Got de nose lak de fox, an' de bad eye lak' de snake. All tam he mak' Pete Mateese work ver' mooch. Tell heem, he mak' plent' money. But she no giv' heem no money—always Pete Mateese got it comin'—she got to wait. Som' day Meestaire Squeeg she pull out—den Pete Mateese got nut'in." [323]

"Yo' say he's a li'l slit-eyed runt—rat-faced—with a squeaky voice?" Waseche mimicked Mr. Squigg's tone. The Indian nodded emphatically, and for a long time Waseche was silent—thinking.

"An' yo' say these heah is Pete Mateese's dawgs?" Again the Indian nodded, and Waseche Bill's eyes narrowed: "An' yo' say they ah in Ten Bow—Pete Mateese an' this heah Misteh Squigg?"

"Ten Bow," repeated the Indian. "Meestaire Squeeg, she tak' de gol' an' buy de claim." Waseche Bill turned to the others:

"Come on, we'll hit the trail!" And then, to the Indian, "Yo' come, too, an' fetch them dawgs." Connie noticed that his big partner's voice was very low, and once, turning quickly, he surprised the cold, hard gleam in the grey eyes.

"He must be the same man that tried to make me give up my claim, the time I beat out the Ten Bow stampede," confided the boy, as he munched beside Waseche's sled. [324]

"Oh, he did—did he?" asked the man, in the same low, hard tone. "We'll jest count that in, too."

"What do you mean? Do you know Mr. Squigg?"

"No. But I *will*," drawled Waseche. "Yo' see, kid, he's the man I bought them dawgs off of last fall in Eagle. Come along, now, le's mush. I'm gettin' plumb anxious to meet up with this heah Misteh Squigg."

CHAPTER XXII

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THE MAN WHO DIDN'T FIT

The return of Connie Morgan and Waseche Bill to Ten Bow, and the events that followed, are told to this day on the trails.

McDougall paused for a chat with Dutch Henry beside the long black dump of the German's claim.

"It's most time for the break-up, Mac," said the owner of the dump. "We'll sluice out big, this spring."

"Yes, mon, we will," agreed McDougall, as his eyes roved to the small snow-covered dump across the creek. "But, it's sore I've hated to see yon claim idle the winter—an' the laddie gaen—an' Waseche Bill—heaven knaws wheer. D'ye mind what the mon fr' Eagle told, how the lad c'd na be stopped, but trailed on after Waseche* *—on to the Lillimuit? They'll na com' back." Dutch Henry nodded.

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"Sure, Mac, but whad' ye 'spect from the breed of Sam Morgan? 'Member how he beat us all to these here diggin's, with ondy them three old dogs. I'd give my claim to have 'em safe back. An' I'm sorry you lost your ten-team, too, Mac."

"Losh! Mon! 'Tis na'thing at a'—the dogs! The laddie tuk 'em—an' welcome. Ye sh'd o' seed the luk i' his e'e, the mornin' he com' bustin' into my cabin wi' the news that Waseche was gaen! 'I'll fetch him back,' he says, 'if I have to beat him up'—an' him na bigger'n a pint o' cider. They've gaen to the Lillimuit, Dutch, an' 'taint in reason they'll com' back. But, sometimes, when I think o' the luk i' the laddie's e'e, d'ye knaw, it comes to me that, me'be—" The man's voice trailed into silence as his gaze became fixed upon the moving black specks that appeared far down the Yukon trail. Dutch Henry's gaze followed the big Scotchman's.

"Look, Mac! Look!" he cried excitedly. "Them dogs!" And, almost at the same instant, with a roar like the bellow of a bull, McDougall sprang down the trail between the straggling cabins of Ten Bow, with Dutch Henry pounding along in his wake. Before the two had covered half the length of the camp other men joined them, running and yelling—though they knew not why they ran. Cabins and shafts were deserted and all Ten Bow strung out on the trail to meet the rapidly approaching dog teams. And when they did meet, a half-mile beyond the camp, Connie was rushed from his feet by the wildly yelling crowd and carried triumphantly into Ten Bow upon the broad shoulders of the big men of the North. For, as McDougall had said, word had come down from Eagle, and now, not because he was Sam Morgan's boy, but for his own grit and pluck and courage, Connie Morgan had won his place among the sourdoughs of the silent land.

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"Know a man name of Misteh Squigg?" asked Waseche Bill of McDougall, as half a dozen men sat late that night about the stove in the little cabin that had lain deserted all through the winter.

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"Yes, I ken the mon—an' na gude o' him, neither, wi' his leetle shifty e'en. I've mistrusted um fr' the time I furst seed um. D'ye ken, laddie, t'was him tried to drive ye fr' yer claim wi' his lawyer's drivvle, whilst Waseche was down to Hesitation?" Connie nodded, and McDougall continued: "I sent him about his business i' jig time, an' na more was he seed i' Ten Bow till a matter o' three or four months agane up he pops wi' a half-breed that's workin' fr' um. He bought Dave Crampton's claim an' has be'n workin' ut since. Why d'ye ask?" For answer Waseche motioned to the Indian who sat upon his blanket spread upon the floor:

"Kobuk, go fetch Pete Mateese. An' don't let Misteh Squigg know yo' fetchin' him." The Indian arose and passed noiselessly out into the night. A quarter of an hour later he returned, closely followed by a huge half-breed with mild, ox-like eyes, who smiled broadly upon the assembly.

"Heem Pete Mateese," grunted the Indian, and sank again to his blanket. Waseche Bill regarded the big, simple-minded half-breed intently, and then flashed the question:

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"Wheah is Carlson?" Instantly the smile faded from the man's face and a look of deep sorrow darkened his eyes.

"Lillimuit," he answered, sadly. "On Ignatook he dig for de gol'." The half-breed looked about him upon the faces of the men who wondered what it was all about.

"Go on," encouraged Waseche, "tell more."

"De Ignatook, she don' freeze—she wa'm. De white Injun, she don' go dare—she 'fraid. We go dare, me an' Carlson, she ma pardner, an' she say de gol' ees here. Bimby, de grub git low an' Carlson sen' me for more. Dat two winter ago. I tak' de gol' een one can an' I mak' eet t'rough to Eagle by Tatonduk divide. Den I see Meestaire Squeeg. He say he tak' de gol' an' buy de grub so I

not git cheat. Den she los' de gol'. She ver' sorry, an' she say y'u com' work for me, fi' dollaire a day an' grub, an' pret' soon y'u mak' 'nough to go back to y'u pardner. Meestaire Squeeg, she buy my dog—feefy dollaire apiece—four hunder' dollaire—an' she say she keep de money so I no los'—I no git cheat. An' she say de money she hav' eentrees', ten p'cent. So me, I go 'long an' work for heem an' we clean oop good on Turtle Creek. Den we com' Ten Bow an' Meestaire Squeeg, she buy de claim, an' I say I lak de money now, I got 'nough. I tak' de grub to Carlson. But Meestaire Squeeg she say, no, y'u ain't got no money—de eentrees' she eat dat money all oop. She count oop fas', ten p'cent, she say. So I work som' more, but all de tam de eentrees' she eat me oop. Eef eet ain't for de eentrees' I mak' 'nough to tak' de grub to Carlson."

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The big men and the one small boy in the little cabin listened intently to the half-breed's simply told tale. When he finished Waseche Bill cleared his throat and glanced from one to the other of the silent listeners.



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"Between them walked a little, rat-faced man. The man was Mr. Squigg."

"Boys," he said, "Carlson is dead. He died alone—way out yondeh in the Lillimuit. He died huntin' fo' Pete Mateese, his pahdneh that didn't come back. Befo' he died he found the gold he know'd was theah. We seen the gold, an' it's *cached* theah yet, jest wheah he done left it. Carlson was a *man*. If Pete Mateese had went back, he'd of be'n livin' now. An' Pete Mateese would of went back if he'd of be'n let alone." He ceased speaking and, without a word, Big McDougall and Dick Colton rose from their chairs and passed out into the night. The little clock ticked monotonously while the others waited. Presently the two returned, and between them walked a little, rat-faced man. The man was Mr. Squigg, and as he entered, his slit-like eyes blinked rapidly in the lamp-light, and shot nervous, venomous glances upon the faces of the occupants of the cabin. At sight of Pete Mateese his face flushed, then paled, and his thin lips curled backward from his teeth.

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"What you doin' here?" he rasped.

"He was sent fo', Misteh Squigg, same as yo' was," drawled Waseche Bill.

"This is an outrage!" squeaked the man. "Who are you? And what right have you got to bring folks here against their will?"

"Who, me? Oh, I'm Waseche Bill. I jest wanted fo' to meet up with yo'—that's all. Yo' name fits yo' like a new glove, don't it, Misteh Squigg? An', Misteh Squigg, this heah's my pahdneh, Connie Mo'gan. I jest heahd how yo' tried fo' to beat him out of this heah claim, back when he beat out the stampede."

"He's a minor, an' he can't hold no claim," whimpered the man; "I'm a lawyer, an' I know. But that was a long while ago. I'll let that pass."

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"Sho' now, Misteh Squigg," Waseche drawled, "it's good of yo' to let that pass. We was feared yo' mout of laid it up against yo'self. But theah's anotheh li'l matteh we-all would like to cleah up befo' the evenin's oveh. Yo' rec'lect I'm the pahty that bought them dawgs off yo' in Eagle—but we'll come to that lateh. This heah Pete Mateese, now, the's sev'el li'l items we-all want the straight of. Fust off, wheah's the can of gold Pete Mateese give yo' to buy grub with in Eagle?"

"It's none of your business!" shrilled the man. "Besides, it's a lie! I didn't see no gold. Let me out of here! You ain't got no right to hold me."

"Ain't we? Well, Misteh Squigg, yo' might's well know yo' ah undeh arrest, an' we-all aim to give yo' a faih an' speedy trial."

"You *can't* arrest me!" squealed the man.

"But, we *done* it—didn't we? If yo' don't b'lieve it, jest yo' try to walk out that do'."

"You ain't got no authority! It ain't accordin' to law!"

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"This heah ain't exactly a co'te of law—it's a co'te of justice. They's quite a con'sid'ble dif'ence—mostly," answered Waseche, and turning to Connie, he said.

"Jest get out yo' pen, kid, an' set down the figgehs so we c'n get things faih an' squah. One can

of gold, nine thousand dollahs. Now, them dawgs—they was eight dawgs at fifty dollahs a head, that's fo' hund'ed dollahs mo'."

"I object!" piped Mr. Squigg, "I'm a lawyer, an' I know——"

"Yo' mout be a lawyeh, Misteh Squigg, but yo' ain't in no shape to 'bjeet—not none serious. Now, them wages owin' to Pete Mateese, neah's we c'n calc'late, it's fo'teen months at five dollahs a day. Figgeh it up, kid, an' set it down." Connie busied himself over his paper.

"That comes to twenty-one hundred dollars," he announced.

"It ain't true! I didn't agree to pay him! You can't prove it! I deny everything!"

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"Yo' ain't b'lieved," calmly drawled Waseche. "How much yo got down altogetheh, son?"

"Eleven thousand five hundred dollars."

"Now, theah's this heah int'rest. Ten peh cent, wornt it, Misteh Squigg?" But Mr. Squigg only growled.

"Twelve thousand six hundred and fifty, all told," computed Connie. Waseche turned to the infuriated Mr. Squigg.

"That's what's owin' to Pete Mateese. C'n yo' pay it—*now*?"

"No, I can't! An' I never will! Yo' can't enforce no such high-handed proceedin's! It ain't accordin' to law!"

"It's accordin' to Ten Bow, though," answered Waseche, shortly. "An' seein' yo ain' got the cash oah the dust, we-all'll jest trouble yo' to make oveh yo' claim to Pete Mateese. An' bein' yo' only give ten thousan' fo' it, yo' c'n give yo' note fo' the balance. Give him the pen, son."

"I won't do it! This is an outrage!" whined the man.

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"Sho', now, Misteh Squigg, co'se yo'll do it." Waseche Bill turned to the others. "We-all will give Misteh Squigg five minutes to think it oveh. Then some of yo' boys jest amble out an' tell it around camp—the story of Carlson, the man that died 'cause his pahdneh couldn't go back. The boys'll be right int'rested, 'cause a lot of 'em know'd Carlson, an' they liked him. Mos' likely they'll call a meetin' an'——"

"Gi' me the pen! Gi' me the pen!" shrieked Mr. Squigg, whose face had gone pasty white. And the men saw that the hand that held the pen trembled violently.

"Now, Misteh Squigg," announced Waseche, when the other had finished, "*yo' git!* An' if yo' know what's good fo' yo', yo'll keep on *gittin'*! Alaska don't need such men as yo'. *Yo' don't fit!* This heah's a *big* country, Misteh Squigg. It's broad, an' long, an' clean. An' the men that live in it ah rough men, but theah heahs is as big as the country. An' they ah men that stand fo'-squah with each otheh, an' with the wo'ld. In Alaska a man c'n count on faih play, an' it don't make no dif'ence if his hide is white, oah red, oah yallah, oah black. 'Cause he ain't measu'ed acco'din' to colah noah heft, noah by the gold in his poke, neitheh. It's what a man *does* that counts. The li'l eveh-day acts an' deeds that shows wheah his heah is—an' what's in him. An', now, Misteh Squigg, yondeh's the do'. An' beyond, the trail stretches away—an' fah away. Eveh mile yo' put between yo'self an Ten Bow is a friend of yo'n. Me'be somewheahs theah's a place li'l enough fo' a man with a heah as small, an' hahd, an' black as a double B shot. If they is, an' yo' c'n find it, yo'll be *home*. But don't stop to hunt fo' it in Alaska—it ain't heah." As Waseche Bill finished, the door opened and, without a word, Mr. Squigg slunk into the star-lit night—the softly radiant night that brushed caressingly the white snows of Aurora Land.

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"Squigg slunk into the star-lit night."

Late the men of Ten Bow talked about the little stove. At last, when they arose to go, Big McDougall stepped close to Connie's side.

"Laddie," he said, "wad ye do a favour f'r an auld mon—jest the ain time?"

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"What!" exclaimed the boy, and his eyes shone, "do a favour for *you!* For the man that lent me the best dog-team in all Alaska! Why, if it hadn't been for your dogs, Mac, I could never have found Waseche. Just name it, and you'll see!"

"Weel spoken, lad! Spoken like a mon!" The Scot's eyes twinkled. "An' I'll hold ye to yer word. The favour is this: that ye'll accept the ten-team o' *malamutes* that's carried ye so far acrost unmapped miles, as a present fr' an auld mon whose heart thinks more o' ye than his rough auld tongue c'n tell." The boy stared speechless at the big, smiling man. And when, at length, he found his voice, the words choked in his throat:

"But—you said—it was a favour, Mac—I—"

"Wheest, laddie, an' a favour it is. For McDougall's growin' auld f'r the trails. Theer's gude years ahead o' yon dogs, but I've na mind to gi' 'em the wark they need to keep 'em in fettle. An' dogs is uncommon like men—'gin they loaf about the streets o' town a spell they get lazy an' no 'count. But, wi' yersel' to put 'em ower the trail noo an' again, they'll be a team o' pleasure an' profit to ye. F'r they're braw dogs altogether an' t'would be shamefu' they should dwindle to the common herd o' scavage dogs."

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And so, Connie, gracefully as he could in his confusion, granted McDougall's favour. But in doing so the small boy could not foresee—nor could any man in the cabin foresee—the chain of adventures into which the possession of the ten-team would lead him. For, had he not owned the ten-team, he would not have happened, just at the right moment, upon Big Dan McKeever, sergeant of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, at a time when the sergeant, with white, set face, battled against odds of a thousand to one, while fifty men looked helplessly out across the mile-wide field of heaving, crashing river ice when the spring break-up hit the mighty Yukon. And, if Sergeant McKeever—but all that has no part in this story.

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In the little cabin on Ten Bow the hour was late, and the bearded men had arisen to go. As each passed through the door to seek his own cabin, he gripped hard the hand of Pete Mateese, and O'Brien, and Waseche Bill—and *both* hands of Connie Morgan—the boy who was a *tillicum*.

As they wended their way homeward in the midnight the little stars winked and glittered radiantly upon these big men of the North. While far away on the long bleak trail, the same little

stars gleamed cold and hard upon a swiftly moving black speck where, with white face and terror-gripped heart, Mr. Squigg added friendly miles to the distance that separated Ten Bow from *The Man Who Didn't Fit*.

Transcriber's Notes:

Maintained original spelling and punctuation of the dialect.

Obvious printer errors have been corrected.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CONNIE MORGAN IN ALASKA ***

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