



THE RIVER of SKULLS

by George Marsh

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WNU SERVICE

CHAPTER XIV—Continued

"They've got forty or fifty miles start on us, Noel," said Alan, bitterly, as the four Ungavas threw their weight into their collars and the long toboggan creaked off over the river ice with its heavy load. "They've been lashing their dogs to get a big lead and shake us off."

"Ah-hah!" answered the tight-lipped Indian. "But some day dey come back to dese fellers." He nodded at the shaggy huskies and their black leader pacing at the heels of the hurrying men.

"It'll be a long race if they still have the six dogs they brought from Fort George," groaned Cameron, tortured by the thought of Heather's agony at being torn from her father—of her despair.

"More dog you got, more feesh you mus' carry or dey starve. Before mane day Rough and de pup weel run dem off dere feet. Den wan day we see starve dog on de trail—den more starve dog. An' w'en our sled grow more light from good feed of our dog, we run—run all day. Dat Rough weel eat up de snow. You see! Dey keel dere dog now w'ile we save ours."

"I know our four dogs are better than their six," agreed the broken Alan, "but I can't bear to think of her with McQueen. I'd like to take a week's grub and travel night and day until we reached her!"

"Den we starve before we see de head of riviere — and Heather starve, also."

"You're right. This load will slow us down at first but we'll soon start to gain. They'll run their dogs ragged trying to reach their cache and get away."

"We get dem soon!"

"But think of her watching the back trail—day after day, wondering why we don't come!"

"She know we follow. Every day, Alan, she know we come fas' wid Rough an' de pup. She have de strong heart," consoled Noel as the two led the team down the white valley between the barren hills. "She know, some day she see us."

It was a long trail to the cache at the head of the river but, as the willing Ungavas took the heavy load over the river ice, Alan's mad desire to lighten the sled by abandoning food in an attempt to overtake at once the girl he loved still fought with his better judgment. The horror of her situation tormented him through the hours, spurring him on—on. Somewhere up the Koksoak these men he followed were lashing their dogs—taking her farther and farther away while she called to him—called his name. He could hear her.

At the fork McQueen's trail swung up the Koksoak, as they anticipated it would, and not towards Chimo. He was making for the East Coast but well Alan realized that McQueen, if he got away, would carry to the coast with his stolen gold no witness to the murder of John McCord. Somewhere on the trail, later on, they would desert her—leave her young body to the foxes and the Wolverines.

As they stopped to give the dogs a "breather," Alan dropped to his knees beside the black lead-dog. Taking the husky's jaws in his two mittened hands while the dog's frosted breath lifted in a cloud from his panting jaws and lolling tongue, Alan looked long into Rough's brown eyes.

"They've got her, boy—got Heather! They're a long, long way ahead of us, but we're going to wear them down—going to run them off their feet before the end. We're going to get Heather, Rough, Heather who always loved you."

At the name, the husky pricked his ears and looked around, as if searching for his comrade of the golden hair who rolled with him in the snow.

Alan's voice was rough with emotion as he went on. "She's calling to us, boy. I heard her—calling to you and me to save her. It's a hard pull now—that sled load, Rough, but we'll need it, every pound."

The dog thrust his nose towards Alan's hood and sniffed as his deep throat rumbled.

"It's going to be hard on the big dog, running most of the day with little rest. But it's for Heather, Rough—for Heather!"

Again the dog pricked his ears and stood up in his harness to sweep the river ice with a quick look. Then, with a whine, he looked in his master's face as if asking for an explanation.

In turn Alan patted and talked to Powder, Shot and Rogue.

"You three pups," he said, "are going to break your backs to help old Rough! We're going faster and faster and some day I'm going to ask you to give everything you've got—every last pound to bring Heather back to us."

The great huskies hunched against the skin leggings of the man, nuzzling his hand, as he talked to them while he rubbed their ears.

In the morning, starting in the freezing November air, under the stars, they pushed on up the desolate valley to make camp in the

dusk of a wind-break of spruce. When fed, the tired dogs at once dug sleep-holes in the snow and, curling up, noses in tails, defied the frost with their thick, double coats.

At the gorge of the Naskapi ambush, while it was still light, they reached McQueen's first camp, in the thick scrub of the river bottom below the rapids.

"By gar, he drive dose dog all day and all night," said Noel, examining the snow about the camp ground.

"They must have jumped our camp before daylight, then traveled fifty or sixty miles before they slept. They must be that much ahead of us now," groaned Alan.

"Sleep hole of seex dog, here," announced Noel. "Dey keel dose dog for sure!"

"Yes, but we're two days behind them, Noel! It's going to be days and days before we begin to gain on them with this load. I wish—"

"Ah-hah! Wat dis?" Noel held a scrap of inner bark which had been stripped from a dwarf birch. "Some-



"We're going to get Heather, Rough, Heather who always loved you."

"ing on dis, Alan!" cried the Indian, handing the sheet of bark to his friend.

"Where'd you find it?"

"In dis spruce, here!"

Alan's mittened hand shook as he read the scrawled words burned with a charred stick on the bark. "Safe!" he read, huskily. "I—love—you! H."

"Noel! Noel!" cried the half-franc Cameron. "She left this for us! She left this message! She's safe—safe, but she's waiting for us and we're just crawling with this load! Let's gamble, Noel! Take 300 pounds and race the dogs! We'll get them—then—get them in a few days! I can't stand it—thinking of her watching the back trail—watching day after day!"

The Indian seized his friend by the shoulders. "You are kiskweil!" he said, sternly. "You know bet-tair! Wid t'ree hunder, dat mean wid our ooder stuff, less dan ten day grub and we starve on de head-water. For we weel run into beeg snow, mabee drifter—mabee two. Dat might hold us up t'ree-four day. You weesh Heather starve wid us, w'en we get her?"

"Oh, I know you're right—I know you're right, but the waiting is hard—hard!"

Alan knew that Noel was right but his anxiety to reach Heather lashed him like a whip, tortured him as the somber spruce of the river shores moved slowly past.

But that night as he crawled into his sleeping-bag, the scrap of birch inside his inner vest of faun skin, he repeated again and again, "She believes me now! She knows I love her! She knows!"

CHAPTER XV

On went the dog team up the frozen Koksoak. Husbanding the strength of his beloved huskies; but-tressing their vitality with big meals but, as the sled slowly lightened, traveling faster with longer hours, Alan held to the tracks on the river ice and over the shores around open rapids and gorges, as a fox hangs to a rabbit trail. They passed the mouth of the River of Death and passed on to the Long lake where they had picked up Nayayo. Here, over the hard surface of the wind-pounded ice the Ungavas gave proof of the royal strain from which they sprang. Mile after mile, through two days, they took the still heavy sled at a trot. But McQueen had lashed his dogs over the good going

of the lake ice and, from his campsites, was still two days ahead. Desperate, he was gambling with starvation and the strength of his dogs to out-distance the inexorable fate that hung to his heels.

As they approached the narrows, at the end of the second long day on the lake ice, following the tracks that did not swing in to the shore but still kept on until they faded into the distance, the disheartened Alan turned to his friend.

"It's no use, Noel! They're more than two days ahead, tonight! They've gained on us coming up the lake. I thought we'd pick up on them, with our dogs traveling the way they have, but they've gained!"

"Dey have whip dere dog hard on dis lak," consoled Noel, "but aftair dis, eet ees up-hill, up-hill ovaire shore—rapide aftair rapide. Dat ees w're our strong dog run dem down. Tired dog weel not pull up-hill."

But Alan would not be comforted. McQueen was still gaining and, day after day, Heather was being taken farther and farther from him, to

where it had started to freeze in the snow, Alan pressed ahead on the run.

As they approached, the yellowish-brown, long bodied beasts watched him for a space, then, leaving the dark thing on the trail, set off on a lops on the shore. Raising the sights on his rifle, Alan knelt, took careful aim and fired. One of the brutes fell, rose and fell again, to lie still, while the men and the excited team approached the shape on the ice.

Freed from the tension that had tightened his nerves, Alan shouted as he saw what it was: "One gone for Mr. McQueen! No more beatings for him! He's out of his misery now!"

On the trail before them lay the torn carcass of one of McQueen's dogs which the excited Rough and his teammates endeavored to reach.

Ordering the dogs to lie down, Alan examined the body of the husky that had given his all for a pitiless master.

"Worked to the bone, Noel! He's driving them to the limit!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Like the great blue heron, it is one of our most adroit and expert fishermen and will remain motionless for incredible periods while waiting for small fish, frogs or other marsh and water inhabitants to approach within striking distance of its beak. Often it will be observed "treading" water as if in the act of squeezing out hidden shellfish or mollusks in the muck below.

It is one of our most timid and suspicious birds and knows how to keep itself concealed from the eyes of the marsh hunter. Yet it stalked cautiously and patiently it will reveal to the eye many interesting characteristics of bird life. It is a bird friend well worth studying.

Mapmaking an Old Art

Mapmaking is centuries old. Even ancient Babylonians outlined their country in clay. And cartographers (mapmakers) of those days weren't any too particular about getting all the facts before they made their maps. There was the Greek scholar, for example, who measured the distance between two towns and from that calculated the size of the entire earth!

It Must Be Admitted Waiter Was Not Tactful

The customer was raging and fuming as the manager came up. "What is the matter, sir?" asked the manager.

"Discharge that waiter at once!" demanded the diner.

Regarding the boiled egg which had been served, the manager said:

"I'm very sorry about this egg, sir, but I can't discharge the waiter for that. After all, he wasn't to know that there was a chicken in it."

"Perhaps not," snapped the customer. "But when I told him there was, he needn't have taken away my spoon and brought me a knife and fork."

Norse Seamen

Hardy, indeed, are Norway's seamen. Though Norway ranks but forty-seventh in population among the major nations, her merchant marine is fourth largest in the world. Since the days of the Vikings, Norwegian seamen have specialized in long ocean trips. Even today they carry most of the cargoes from America's Gulf states to Europe.

In the days of sailing ships, too, Norwegian skippers began taking their families to sea because ocean voyages took many months. The sailors' superstition that women are bad luck to a ship, never bothered them.

'Hill-Climbing' Boats

A unique steamship service operates between the East Prussian towns of Elbing and Deutsch-Eylau, a distance of 40 miles. Part of the trip is made on a canal and part on a railroad, whose specially designed trucks pick up the little vessels and quickly carry them over four long hills. These "hill-climbing boats" have rendered unnecessary the construction of 20 locks.—Collier's Weekly.

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