

THE YUKON TRAIL

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An Alaskan Love Story
By
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CHAPTER XVIII.

A New Way of Leaving a House.
The surge of disgust with which Sheba had broken her engagement to marry Macdonald ebbed away as the weeks passed. It was impossible for her to wait upon him in his illness and hold any repugnance toward this big, elemental man. The thing he had done might be wrong, but the very openness and frankness of his relation to Meteteese redeemed it from shame. He was neither a profligate nor a squaw man.

This was Diane's point of view, and in time it became to a certain extent that of Sheba. One takes on the color of one's environment, and the girl from Drogheda knew in her heart that Meteteese and Colmac were no longer the real barriers that stood between her and the Alaskan. She had been disillusioned, saw him more clearly; and though she still recognized the quality of bigness that set him apart, her spirit did not now do such complete homage to it. More and more her thoughts contrasted him with another man.

Macdonald did not need to be told that he had lost ground, but with the dogged determination that had carried him to success he refused to accept the verdict. She was a woman, therefore to be won. The habit of victory was so strong in him that he could see no alternative.

The motor-car picnic to the Willow Creek camp was a case in point. Sheba did not want to go, but she went. The picnic was a success. Macdonald was an outdoor man rather than a parlor one. He took charge of the luncheon, lit the fire, and cooked the coffee without the least waste of effort. In his shirt sleeves, the neck open at the throat, he looked the embodiment of masculine vigor. Diane could not help mentioning it to her cousin.

"Isn't he a splendid human animal?" Sheba nodded. "He's wonderful."
"If I were a little Irish colleen and he had done me the honor to care for me, I'd have fallen fathoms deep in love with him."

The Irish colleen's eyes grew reflective. "Not if you had seen Peter first, Di. There's nothing reasonable about a girl, I do believe. She loves—or else she just doesn't."

Diane fired a question at her point-blank. "Have you met your Peter? Is that why you hang back?"

The color flamed into Sheba's face. "Of course not. You do say the most outrageous things, Di."

They had driven to Willow Creek over the river road. They returned by way of the hills. Macdonald drew up in front of a cabin to fill the radiator.

He stood listening beside the car, the water bucket in his hand. Something unusual was going on inside the house. There came the sound of a thud, of a groan, and then the crash of breaking glass. The whole window frame seemed to leap from the side of the house. The head and shoulders of a man projected through the broken glass.

The man swept himself free of the debris and started to run. Instantly he pulled up in his stride, as amazed to see those in the car as they were to see him.

"Gordon!" cried Diane.
Out of the house poured a rush of men. They too pulled up abruptly at sight of Macdonald and his guests.

A sardonic mirth gleamed in the eyes of the Scotman. "Do you always come out of a house through the wall, Mr. Elliot?" he asked.

"Only when I'm in a hurry," Gordon pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at some gizzards on his face.

"Don't let us detain you," said the Alaskan satirically. "We'll excuse you, since you must go."

"I'm not in such a hurry now. In fact, if you're going to Kuskak, I think I'll ask you for a lift," returned the field agent coolly.

"And your friends-in-a-hurry—do they want a lift too?"

Big Bill Macy came swaying forward, both hands to his bleeding head. "He's a spy, curse him. And he tried to kill me."

"Did he?" commented Macdonald evenly. "What were you doing to him?"

"He can't sneak around our claim under a false name," growled one of the miners. "We'll beat his head off."

"I've had notions like that myself sometimes," assented the big Scotman. "But I think we had all better leave Mr. Elliot to the law. He has Uncle Sam back of him in his spying, and none of us are big enough to buck the government." Crisply Macdonald spoke to Gordon, turning upon him cold, hostile eyes. "Get in if you're going to."

Elliot met him eye to eye. "I've changed my mind. I'm going to walk."

"That's up to you."

Gordon shook hands with Diane and Sheba, went into the house for his coat, and walked to the stable. He brought out his horse and turned it loose, then he took the road himself for Kuskak.

A couple of miles out the car passed him trudging toward. As they flashed down the road he waved a cheerful and nonchalant greeting.

Sheba had been full of gaiety and life, but her mood was changed. All

the way home she was strangely silent.

The days grew short. The last river boat before the freeze-up had long since gone. A month earlier the same steamer had taken down in a mail sack the preliminary report of Elliot to his department chief. One of the passengers on that trip had been Selfridge, sent out to counteract the influence of the evidence against the claimants submitted by the field agent. An information had been filed against Gordon for highway robbery and attempted murder. Wally was to see that the damning facts against him were brought to the attention of officials in high places where the charges would do most good. The details of the story were to be held in reserve for publicity in case the muckrake magazines should try to make capital of the report of Elliot.

Kuskak found much time for gossip during the long nights. It knew that Macdonald had gone on the bond of Elliot in spite of the scornful protest of the younger man. The case against the field agent was pending. Pursuit of the miners who had robbed the big mine-owner had long ago been dropped. Somewhere in the North the outlaws lay hidden, swallowed up by the great white waste of snow.

The general opinion was that Mac was playing politics about the trial of his rival. He would not let the case come to a jury until the time when a conviction would have most effect in the States, the gossips predicted. They did not know that he was waiting for the return of Wally Selfridge. The whispers touched closely the personal affairs of Macdonald. The report of his engagement to Sheba O'Neill had been denied, but it was noticed that he was a constant guest at the home of the Pagets. Young Elliot called there too. Almost any day one or other of the two men could be seen with Sheba on the street. Those who wanted to take a sporting chance on the issue knew that odds were offered sub rosa at the Pay Streak saloon of three to one on Mac.

Sheba rebelled impotently at the situation. The mine-owner would not take "No" for an answer. He wooed her with a steady, dominant persistence that shook even her strong will. There was something resistless in the way he took her for granted. Gordon Elliot had not mentioned love to her, though there were times when her heart fluttered for fear he would. She did not want any more complications. She wanted to be let alone. So when an invitation came from her little friends the Husteds, signed by all three of the children, asking her to come and visit them at the camp back of Katma, the Irish girl jumped at the chance to escape for a time from the decision being forced upon her.

Sheba pledged her cousin to secrecy until after she had gone, so that Miss O'Neill was able to slip away off the stage unnoticed either by Macdonald or Elliot. The only other passenger was an elderly woman going up to the Katma camp to take a place as cook.

Later on the same day Wally Selfridge, coming in over the ice, reached Kuskak with important news for his chief. He brought with him an order from Winton, commissioner of the general land office, suspending Elliot pending an investigation of the charges against him.

Oddly enough, it was to Genevieve Mallory that Macdonald went for consolation when he learned that Sheba had left town. He had always found it very pleasant to drop in for a chat with her, and she saw to it that he met the same friendly welcome now that a rival had annexed his scalp to her slender waist. For Mrs. Mallory did not concede defeat. If the Irish girl could be eliminated, she believed she would yet win.

His hostess looked up at him with a mocking little smile.

"Rumor says that she has run away, my lord. Is it true?"

"Yes. Slipped away on the stage this morning."

"That's a good sign. She was afraid to stay."

It was a part of the fiction between them that Mrs. Mallory was to give him the benefit of her advice in his wooing of her rival. She seemed to take it for granted that he would at last marry Sheba after wearing away the rigid Puritanism of her resentment.

Macdonald had never liked her so well as now. Her point of view was so sane, so reasonable. It asked for no impossible virtues in a man. There was something restful in her genial, derisive understanding of him. She had a silent divination of his moods and ministered indolently to them.

"Do you think so? Ought I to follow her?" he asked.

She showed a row of perfect teeth in a low ripple of amusement. The situation at least was piquant, even though it was at her expense.

"No. Give the girl time. Catch her impulse on the rebound. She'll be bored to death at Katma and she will come back docile."

Her scarlet lips, the long, unbroken lines of the sinuous, opulent body, the challenge of the smoldering eyes, the warmth of her laughter, all invited him

to forget the charms of other women. The faint feminine perfume of her was wafted to his brain. He felt a besieging of the blood.

Stepping behind the chair in which she sat, he tilted back the head of lustrous bronze, and very deliberately kissed her on the lips.

For a moment she gave herself to his embrace, then pushed him back, rose, and walked across the room to a little table. With fingers that trembled slightly she lit a cigarette. Sheathed in her close-fitting gown, she made a strong carnal appeal to him, but there was between them, too, a close bond of the spirit. He made no apologies, no explanation.

Presently she turned and looked at him. Only the deeper color beneath her eyes betrayed any excitement.

"Unless I'm a bad prophet you'll get the answer you want when Sheba comes back, Colby."

He thought her reply to his indiscretion superb. It admitted complicity, reproached, warned and at the same time ignored. Never before had she called him by his given name. He took it as a token of forgiveness and renunciation.

Why was it not Genevieve Mallory that he wanted to marry? The mine-owner carried with him back to his office a sense of the futile irony of life. A score of men would have liked to marry Mrs. Mallory. She had all the sophisticated graces of life and much of the natural charm of an unusually attractive personality. He had only to speak the word to win her, and his fancy had flown in pursuit of a little Puritan with no knowledge of the world.

In front of the Seattle & Kuskak Emporium the Scotsman stopped. A little man who had his back to him was bargaining for a team of huskies. The man turned, and Macdonald recognized him.

"Hello, Gid. Aren't you off your usual beat a bit?" he asked.

The little miner looked him over impudently. "Well—well! If it ain't the big mogul himself—and wantin' to know if I've got permission to travel off the reservation."

"I reckon you travel where you want to, Gid—same as I do."

"Maybeso. I shouldn't wonder if you'd find out quite soon enough what I'm doing here. You never can tell," the old man retorted with a manner that concealed volumes.

Those who were present remembered the words and in the light of what took place later thought them significant.

"Anyhow, it is quite a social event for Kuskak," Macdonald suggested with a smile of irony.

Without more words Holt turned back to his bargaining. The big Scotsman went on his way, remembered that he wanted to see the cashier of the bank which he controlled, and promptly forgot that old Gid existed.

The old man concluded his purchase and drove up to the hotel behind one of the best dog teams in Alaska.

Gideon asked a question of the porter.

"Second floor. That's his room up there," the man answered, pointing to a window.

"Oh, you, seven—eighteen—ninety-nine," the little miner shouted up.

Elliot appeared at the window. "Well, I'll be hanged! What are you doing here, Old-Timer?"

"Oncet I knew a man lived to be a grandpa minding his own business."



For a Moment She Gave Herself to His Embrace.

grinned the little man. "Come down and I'll tell you all about it, boy."

In half a minute Gordon was beside him. After the first greetings the young man nodded toward the dog team.

"How did you persuade Tim Ryan to lend you his huskies?"

"Why don't you take a paper and keep up with the news, son? These huskies don't belong to Tim."

"Meaning that Mr. Gideon Holt is the owner?"

"You've done guessed it," admitted the miner complacently.

He had a right to be proud of the team. It was a famous one even in the North. It had run second for two years in the Alaska sweepstakes to Macdonald's great Siberian wolf-hounds. The leader, Butch, was the hero of a dozen races and a hundred savage fights.

"What in Halifax do you want with the team?" asked Elliot, surprised. "The whole outfit must have cost a small fortune."

"Some dust," admitted Gideon proudly. He winked mysteriously at Gordon. "I got a use for this team, if anyone was to ask you."

"Haven't taken the government mail contract, have you?"

"Not so you could notice it. I'll tell you what I want with this team, as the old sayin' is." Holt lowered his voice and narrowed slyly his little beady eyes. "I'm going to put a crimp in Colby Macdonald. That's what I aim to do with it."

"How?"

The miner beckoned Elliot closed and whispered in his ear.

CHAPTER XIX.

In the Dead of Night.

While Kuskak slept that night the wind shifted. It came roaring across the range and drove before it great scudding clouds heavily laden with sleety snow. From dark till dawn the roar of the wind filled the night. Before morning heavy drifts had wiped out the roads and sheeted the town in virgin white unbroken by trails or furrows.

With the coming of daylight the tempest abated. Kuskak got into its working clothes and dug itself out from the heavy blanket of white that had tucked it in. By noon the business of the town was under way again. That which would have demoralized the activities of a Southern city made little difference to these Arctic Circle dwellers. Roads were cleared, paths shoveled, stores opened. Children in parkas and fur coats trooped to school and studied through the short afternoon by the aid of electric light.

Dusk fell early and with it came a scatter of more snow. Mrs. Selfridge gave a dinner-dance at the club that night and her guests came in furs of great variety and much value. The hostess outdid herself to make the affair the most elaborate of the season. Nobody in Kuskak of any social importance was omitted from the list of invited except Gordon Elliot. Even the grumpy old cashier of Macdonald's bank—an old bachelor who lived by himself in rooms behind those in which the banking was done—was persuaded to break his custom and appear in a rusty old dress suit of the vintage of '95.

The grizzled cashier—his name was Robert Milton—left the clubhouse early for his rooms. It was snowing, but the wind had died down. Contrary to his custom, he had taken two or three glasses of wine. His brain was excited so that he knew he could not sleep. He decided to read "Don Quixote" by the stove for an hour or two.

Arrived at the bank, he let himself into his rooms and locked the door. He stooped to open the draft of the stove when a sound stopped him halfway. The cashier stood rigid, still crouched, waiting for a repetition of the noise. It came once more—the low, dull rasping of a file.

Shivers ran down the spine of Milton and up the back of his head to the roots of his hair. Somebody was in the bank—at two o'clock in the morning—with tools for burglary. He was a scholarly old fellow, brought up in New England and cast out to the uttermost frontier by the malign tragedy of poverty. Adventure offered no appeal to him.

But though his knees trembled beneath him and the sickness of fear was gripping his heart, Robert Milton had in him the dynamic spark that makes a man. He tiptoed to his desk and with shaking fingers gripped the revolver that lay in a drawer.

The cashier braced himself for the plunge, then slowly trod across the room to the inner, locked door. The pained fingers of his left hand could scarce turn the key.

It seemed to him that the night was alive with the noise he made in turning the lock and opening the door. The hinges grated and the floor squeaked beneath the fall of his foot as he stood at the threshold.

Two men were in front of the wire grating which protected the big safe that filled the alcove to the right. One held a file and the other a candle.

Their blank, masked faces were turned toward Milton, and each of them covered him with a weapon.

"W-what are you doing here?" quavered the cashier.

"Drop that gun," came the low, sharp command from one of them.

Some old ancestral instinct in the bank cashier rose out of his panic to destroy him. He wanted to lie down quietly in a faint. But his mind asserted its mastery over the weakling

body. In spite of his terror, of his flinching will, he had to keep the faith. He was guardian of the bank funds. At all costs he must protect them.

His forearm came up with a jerk. Two shots rang out almost together. The cashier sagged back against the wall and slowly slid to the floor.

The guests of Mrs. Selfridge danced well into the small hours. The California champagne stimulated a gaiety that was balm to her soul. She wanted



"Drop That Gun," Came the Low, Sharp Command.

ed her dinner-dance to be smart, to have the atmosphere she had found in the New York cabarets. If everybody talked at once, she felt they were having a good time. If nobody listened to anybody else, it proved that the affair was a screaming success.

Mrs. Wally was satisfied as she bade her guests good-by and saw them pass into the heavy snow that was again falling. They all assured her that there had not been so hilarious a party in Kuskak.

One old-timer, a trifle lit up by reason of too much hospitality, phrased his enjoyment a little awkwardly.

"It's been great, Mrs. Selfridge. Nothing like it since the days of the open dance hall."

Mrs. Mallory hastily suppressed an internal smile and stepped into the breach. "How do you do it?" she asked her hostess enviously.

"My dear, if you say it was a success—"

"What else could one say?"

Genevieve Mallory always preferred to tell the truth when it would do just as well. Now it did better, since it contributed to her own ironic sense of amusement. Macdonald had once told her that Mrs. Selfridge made him think of the saying, "Monkey sees, monkey does." The effervescent little woman had never had an original idea in her life.

Most of those who had been at the dance slept late. They were oblivious of the fact that the storm had quickened again into a howling gale. Nor did they know the two bits of news that were passing up and down the main street and being telephoned from house to house. One of the items was that the stage for Katma had failed to reach the roadhouse at Smith's Crossing. The second bit of news was local. For the first time since Robert Milton had been cashier the bank had failed to open on the dot.

Macdonald was no sluggard. It was his habit not to let the pleasure of the night before interfere with the business of the morning after. But in the darkness he overslept and let the town waken before him. He was roused by the sound of knocking on his door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's me—Jones—Gopher Jones. Say, Mac, the bank ain't open and we can't rouse Milton. Thought I'd come to you, seeing as you're president of the shebang."

In three minutes Macdonald joined the marshal and walked down with him to the bank. He unlocked the front door and turned to the little crowd that had gathered.

"Better wait here, boys. Gopher and I will go in. I expect everything is all right, but we'll let you know about that as soon as we find out."

The bank president opened the door, let the officer enter, and followed himself.

The sun had not yet risen and the blinds were down. Macdonald struck a match and held it up.

"Bank's been robbed," he announced quietly.

"Looks like," agreed Jones. His voice was uneven with excitement.

The Scotch-Canadian lit another match. In the flare of it he saw that the steel grill cutting off the alcove was open and that the door had been blown from the safe.

The marshal clutched at the arm of the banker. "Did you see—that?" he whispered.

His finger pointed through the darkness to the other end of the room. In the faint gray light of coming day Macdonald could see a huddled mass on the floor.

"There has been murder done. I'll get a light. Don't move from here, Jones. I want to look at things before we disturb them. There's no danger. The robbers have been gone for hours."

By the light of another match the mine-owner crossed the room into the sitting room of the cashier. Presently he returned with a lamp and let its light fall upon the figure lying slumped against the wall. A revolver lay close to the inert fingers. The head hung forward grotesquely upon the breast.

The dead man was Milton. His employer saw nothing ridiculous in the twisted neck and sprawling limbs. The cashier had died to save the money entrusted to his care.

Macdonald handed the lamp to the marshal and picked up the revolver. Every chamber was loaded.

"They beat him to it. They were probably here when he reached home. My guess is he heard them right away, got his gun, and came in. He's still wearing his dress suit. That gives us the time, for he left the club about midnight. Soon as they saw him they dropped him. I wouldn't have had this happen for all the money in the safe."

"How much was there in it?"

"I don't know exactly. The books will show. I'll send Wally down to look them over."

"Shot right spang through the heart, looks like," commented Jones, following with his eye the course of the wound.

"Wish I'd been here instead of him," Macdonald said grimly. His eyes softened as he continued to look down at the employee who had paid with his life for his faithfulness. "It wasn't an even break. Poor old fellow! You weren't built for a job like this, Robert Milton, but you played your hand out to a finish. That's all any man can do."

He turned abruptly away and began examining the safe. The silver still stood sacked in one large compartment. The bank notes had escaped the hurried search of the robbers, but the gold was practically all gone. One sack had been torn by the explosion and single pieces of gold could be found all over the safe.

Macdonald glanced over the papers rapidly. The officer picked up one of dozens scattered over the floor. It was a mortgage note made out to the bank by a miner. He collected the others. Evidently the bandits had torn off the rubber, glanced over one or two to see if they had any cash value, and tossed the package into the air as a disgraced gambler does a pack of cards.

The bank president stepped to the door and threw it open. He explained the situation in three sentences.

"I can't let you in now, boys, until the coroner has been here," he went on to tell the crowd. "But there is one way you can all help. Keep your eyes open. If you have seen any suspicious characters around, let me know. Or if anyone has left town in a hurry—or been seen doing anything during the night that you did not understand at the time."

A man named Fred Tague pushed to the front. He kept a feed corral near the edge of town. "I can tell you one man who munched out before five o'clock this morning—and that's Gid Holt."

The eyes of Macdonald, cold and hard as jade, fastened to the man. "How do you know?"

"That dog team he bought from Tim Ryan—Well, he's been keeping it in my corral. When I got there this morning it was gone. The snow hadn't wiped out the tracks of the runners yet, so he couldn't have left more than fifteen minutes before."

"You don't know that Holt took the team himself?"

"Come to that, I don't. But he had a key to the barn where the sled was. Holt has been putting up at the hotel. I reckon it is easy to find out if he's still there."

Macdonald's keen brain followed the facts as the nose of a bloodhound does a trail. Holt, an open enemy of his, had reached town only two days before. He had bought one of the best and swiftest dog teams in the North and had let slip before witnesses the remark that Macdonald would soon find out what he wanted with the outfit. The bank had been robbed after midnight. To file open the grill and to blow up the safe must have taken several hours. Before morning the dogs of Holt had taken the trail. If their owner were with them, it was a safe bet that the sled carried forty thousand dollars in Alaska gold dust.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Reason Why.

"In this railroad case, I want to ask that man a direct question."

"Don't ask him anything direct. Don't you know he's a director?"

Machinery and equipment for a tannery capable of handling 100 hides daily is needed in China.