



The YUKON TRAIL

A TALE OF THE NORTH
BY WILLIAM MACLEOD RAINE

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CHAPTER XXIII.

Holt Frees His Mind.
Macdonald whirled in his tracks. Old Gid Holt was leaning on his elbow with his head out of the window. "You better come and beat me up first, Mac," he jeered. "I'm all stove up with a busted leg, so you can wallop me good. I'd come out there, but I'm too crippled to move."

"You're not too crippled to go back to Kuslak with me. If you can't walk, you'll ride. But back you go."

"Eine. I been worrying about how to get there. It's right good of you to bring one of these here taxis for me, as the old sayin' is."

"Where have you caked the gold you stole?"

"I ain't seen the latest papers, Mac. What is this stuff about robbin' a bank and shootin' Milton?"

"You're under arrest for robbery and murder."

"Am I? Unload the particulars. When did I do it all?"

"You know when. Just before you left town."

Holt shook his head slowly. "No, sir. I can't seem to remember it. Sure it ain't some one else you're thinking about? Howcome you to fix on me as one of the bold, bad bandits?"

"Because you had not sense enough to cover your tracks. You might just as well have left a note saying you did it. First, you come to town and buy one of the fastest dog teams in Alaska. Why?"

"That's an easy one. I bought that team to win the Alaska sweepstakes from you. And I'm goin' to do it. The team wasn't handled right or it would have won last time. I got to mullin' it over and figured that old Gid Holt was the dog puncher that could land those huskies in front. See?"

"You bought it to make your get-away after the robbery," retorted Macdonald.

"It's a difference of opinion makes horse races. What else have you got against us?"

"We found in your room one of the sacks that had held the gold you took from the bank."

"That's right. I took it from the bank in the afternoon, where I had had it on deposit, to pay for the team I bought. Milton's books will show that. But you didn't find any sack I took when your bank was robbed—if it was robbed," added the old man significantly.

"Of course, I knew you would have an alibi. Have you got one to explain why you left town so suddenly the night the bank was robbed? Milton was killed after midnight. Before morning you and your friend Elliot routed out Ackroyd and bought a lot of supplies from him for a hurry-up trip. You slipped around to the corral and hit the trail right into the blizzard. Will you tell me why you were in such a hurry to get away, if it wasn't to escape from the town where you had murdered a decent old fellow who never had harmed a soul?"

"Sure I'll tell you." The black eyes of the little man snapped eagerly. "I came so p. d. q. because that side partner of mine Gordon Elliot wouldn't let me wait till mornin'. He had a reason for leavin' town that wouldn't wait a minute, one big enough to drive him right into the heart of the blizzard. Me, I tagged along."

"I can guess his reason," jeered the Scotsman. "But I'd like to hear you put a name to it."

Holt grinned maliciously and waved a hand toward the girl who was pillowing the head of her lover. "The name of his reason is Sheba O'Neill, but it's to be Sheba Elliot soon, looks like."

"You mean—"

The little miner took the words triumphantly out of his mouth. He leaned forward and threw them into the face of the man he hated. "I mean that while you was dancin' and phlan-derin' with other women, Gordon Elliot was buckin' a blizzard to save the life of the girl you both claimed to love. He was moshin' into fifty miles of frozen hell while you was fillin' up with potted grouse and champagne. Simultaneous with the lame goose and the monkey singstep you was doin', this lad was windjammin' through white drifts. He beat you at your own game, man. You're a bear for the outdoor stuff, they tell me. You chew up a blizzard for breakfast and throttle a pack of wolves to work up an appetite for dinner. It's your specialty. All right. Take your hat off to that cheecko who has just whaled you blind. He has outgamed you, Colby Macdonald. You don't run in his class. I see he is holding his hand up again. Give him another half-hour and he'll be ready to go to the mat with you again."

The big Alaskan pushed away a fear that had been lingering in his mind ever since he had stumbled on that body buried in the snow, yesterday afternoon. Was his enemy going to escape him, after all? Could Holt be telling the true reason why they had left town

so hurriedly? He would not let himself believe it.

"You ought to work up a better story than that," he said contemptuously. "You can throw a husky through the holes in it. How could Elliot know, for instance, that Miss O'Neill was not safe?"

"The same way you could a' known it," snapped old Gideon. "He phoned to Smith's Crossin' and found the stage hadn't got in and that there was a whale of a storm up in the hills."

Macdonald set his face. "You're lying to me. You stumbled over the stage while you were making your get-away. Now you're playing it for an alibi."

Elliot had risen. Sheba stood beside him, her hand in his. She spoke quietly. "It's the truth. Believe it or not as you please. We care nothing about that."

The stab of her eyes, the carriage of the slim, pilant figure with its suggestion of fine gallantry, challenged her former lover to do his worst.

On the battered face of Gordon was a smile. So long as his Irish sweetheart stood by him he did not care if he were charged with high treason. It was worth all it cost to feel the warmth of her brave, impulsive trust.

The deep-set eyes of Macdonald clinched with those of his rival. "You caked the rest of the gold, I suppose," he said doggedly.

With a lit of his shoulders the younger man answered lightly: "There are none so blind as those who will not see, Mr. Macdonald." He turned to Sheba. "Come. We must make breakfast."

"You're going to Kuslak with me," his enemy said bluntly.

"After we have eaten, Mr. Macdonald," returned Elliot with an ironic bow. "Perhaps, if you have not had breakfast yet, you will join us."

"We start in half an hour," announced the mine-owner curtly, and he turned on his heel.

The rifle lay where Sheba had dropped it when she ran to gather her stricken lover into her arms. Macdonald picked it up and strode over the brow of the hill without a backward look. He was too proud to stay and watch them. It was impossible to escape him in the deep snow that filled the hill trails, and he was convinced they would attempt nothing of the kind.

The Scotsman felt for the first time in his life old and spent. Under tremendous difficulty he had mused for two days and had at last run his men down. The lust of vengeance had sat on his shoulders every mile of the way and had driven him feverishly forward. But the salt that had lent a savor to his passion was gone. Even though he won, he lost. For Sheba had gone over to the enemy.

With the fierce willfulness of his temperament he tried to tread under foot his doubts about the guilt of Holt and Elliot. Success had made him arrogant and he was not a good loser.

"You'll call me soon if I should sleep," she said drowsily, and her eyes were closed almost before the words were off her lips.

When Macdonald came to order the start half an hour later, she was still asleep. "Give her another thirty minutes," he said gruffly.

Youth is resilient. Sheba awoke rested and ready for work.

While Gordon was untangling the dogs she was left alone for a minute with the mine-owner.

The hungry look in his eyes touched her. Impulsively she held out her hand.

"You're going to be fair, aren't you, Mr. Macdonald? Because you—don't like him—you won't?"

He looked straight into the dark, appealing eyes. "I'm going to be fair to Robert Milton," he told her harshly. "I'm going to see his murderers hanged if it costs me every dollar I have in the world."

"None of us objects to justice," she told him proudly. "Gordon has nothing to fear if only the truth is told."

"Then why come to me?" he demanded.

She hesitated; then with a wistful little smile, spoke what was in her heart. "I'm afraid you won't do justice to yourself. You're good—and brave—and strong. But you're very willful and set. I don't want to lose my friend. I want to know that he is all I have believed him—a great man who stands for the things that are fine and clean and just."

"Then it is for my sake and not for his that you want me to drop the case against Elliot?" he asked ironically.

"For yours and for his, too. You can't hurt him. Nobody can really be hurt from outside—not unless he is a traitor to himself. And Gordon Elliot isn't that. He couldn't do such a thing as this with which you charge him. It is not in his nature. He can explain everything."

"I don't doubt that. He and his friend Holt are great little explainers. In spite of his bitterness Sheba felt a change in him. She seemed to have a glimpse of his turbid soul en-

gaged in battle. He turned away without shaking hands, but it struck her that he was not implacable.

While they were at luncheon half a dozen packmules laden with supplies for a telephone construction line outfit had passed. Their small, sharp-shod hoofs had punched sink-holes in the trail at every step. Instead of a smooth bottom the dogs found a slushy bog cut to pieces.

At the end of an hour of wallowing Macdonald called a halt.

"There is a cutoff just below here. It will save us nearly two miles, but we'll have to break trail. Swing to the right just below the big willow," he told Elliot. "I'll join you presently and relieve you on the job. But first Miss O'Neill and I are going for a little side trip."

All three of them looked at him in sharp surprise. Gordon opened his lips to answer and closed them again without speaking. Sheba had flashed a warning to him.

"I hope this trip isn't very far off the trail," she said quietly. "I'm just a wee bit tired."

"It's not far," the mine-owner said curtly.

He was busy unpacking his sled. Presently he found the dog moccasins for which he had been looking, re-packed his sled, and fitted the shoes to the bleeding feet of the team leader. Elliot, suspicious and uncertain what to do, watched him at work, but at a signal from Sheba turned reluctantly away and drove down to the cutoff.

Macdonald turned his dogs out of the trail and followed a little ridge for perhaps a quarter of a mile. Sheba trudged behind him. She was full of wonder at what he meant to do, but she asked no questions. Some wise instinct was telling her to do exactly as he said.

From the sled he took a shovel and gave it to the young woman. "Dig just this side of the big rock—close to the root of the tree," he told her.

Sheba dug, and at the second stroke of the spade struck something hard. He stooped and pulled out a sack.

"Open it," he said. "Rip it with this knife."

She ran the knife along the coarse weave of the cloth. Fifteen or twenty smaller sacks lay exposed. Sheba looked up at Macdonald, a startled question in her eyes.

He nodded. "You guessed it. This is part of the gold for which Robert Milton was murdered."

"But—how did it get here?"

"I buried it there yesterday. Come." He led her around the rock. Back of it lay something over which was spread a long bit of canvas. The heart of Sheba was beating wildly.

The Scotsman looked at her from a rock-bound face. "Underneath this canvas is the body of one of the men who murdered Milton. He died more miserably than the man he shot. Half the gold stolen from the bank is in that gunnysack you have just dug up. If you'll tell me who has the other half, I'll tell you who helped him rob the bank."

"This man—who is he?" asked Sheba, almost in a whisper. She was trembling with excitement and nervousness.

Macdonald drew back the cloth and showed the rough, hard face of a workman.

"His name was Trelawney. I kicked him out of our camps because he was a troublemaker."

"He was one of the men that robbed you later?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. And now he has tried to rob me again and has paid for it with his life."

Her mind flashed back over the past. "Then his partner in this last crime must have been the same man—what's his name?—that was with him last time."

"Northrup." He nodded slowly. "I hate to believe it, but it is probably true. And he, too, is lying somewhere in this park covered with snow—if our guess is right."

"And Gordon—you admit he didn't do it?"

Again he nodded, sulkily. "No. He didn't do it."

Joy lit in her voice. "So you've brought me here to tell me. Oh, I am glad, my friend, that you were so good. And it is like you to do it. You have always been the good friend to me."

The Scotsman smiled, a little wistfully. "You take a mean advantage of a man. You nurse him when he is ill—and are kind to him when he is well—and try to love him, though he is twice your age and more. Then, when his enemy is in his power, he finds he can't strike him down without striking you too. Take your young man, Sheba O'Neill, and marry him, and for God's sake, get him out of Alaska before I come to grips with him again. I'm not a patient man, and he's tried me sair. They say I'm a good hater, and I always thought it true. But what's the use of hating a man, when your soft arms are round him for an arm?"

The fine eyes of the girl were wells of warm light. Her gladness was not for herself and her lover only, but for the friend that had been so nearly lost and was now found. He believed he had done it for her, but Sheba was sure his reasons lay deeper. He was too much of a man to hide evidence and let his rival be falsely accused of murder. It was not in him to do a cheap thing like that. When it came to the pinch, he was too decent to stab in the back. But she was willing to take him on his own ground.

"I'll always be thanking you for your goodness to me," she told him simply.

He brushed that aside at once. "There's one thing more, lass. I'll likely not be seeing you again alone, so I'll say it now. Don't waste any tears on Colby Macdonald. Don't fancy any story-book foolishness about spoiling his life. That may be true of

Elliot was none the less guilty. The heart of the Scotsman was bitter within him. He intended to see that his enemies paid to the last ounce. He would hurry them to the gallows if money and influence could do it.

None the less, his doubts persisted. If they had planned the bank robbery, why did they wait so long to buy supplies for their escape? Why had they not taken the river instead of the hill trail? The story that his enemies told hung together. It had the ring of truth. The facts supported it.

One piece of evidence in their favor Macdonald alone knew. It lay buried in the deep snows of the hills. He shut his strong teeth in the firm resolve that it should stay there.

The weather had moderated a good deal, but the trail was a protected forest one. The two teams now going down had come up, so that the path was packed fairly hard and smooth. Holt lay propped on his own sled against the sleeping-bags. Sheba munched behind Gordon. She chatted with them both, but ignored entirely the existence of Macdonald, who followed with his prize-winning Siberian dogs.

Though she tried not to let her lover know it, Sheba was troubled at heart. Gordon was practically the prisoner of a man who hated him bitterly, who believed him guilty of murder, and who would go through fire to bring punishment home to him. She knew the power of Macdonald. With the money back of him, he had for two years fought against and almost prevailed over a strong public opinion in the United States. He was as masterful in his hatred as in his love. The dominant, fighting figure in the Northwest, he trod his sturdy way through opposition like a Colossus.

Nor did she any longer have any illusions about him. He could be both ruthless and unscrupulous when it suited his purpose. As the day wore toward noon, her spirits drooped. She was tired physically, and this reacted upon her courage.

The warmer weather was spoiling the trail. It became so soft and mushy that though snowshoes were needed, they could not be worn on account of the heavy snow which clung to them every time a foot was lifted. They wore mukluks, but Sheba was wet to the knees. The spring had gone from her step. Her shoulders began to sag.

For some time Gordon's eye had been seeking a good place for a day camp. He found it in a bit of open timber above the trail, and without a word he swung his team from the path. "Where are you going?" demanded Macdonald.

"Going to rest for an hour," was Elliot's curt answer.

Macdonald's jaw clamped. He strode forward through the snow beside the trail. "We'll see about that."

The younger man faced him angrily. "Can't you see she is done, man? There is not another mile of travel in her until she has rested."

The hard, gray eyes of the Alaskan took in the slender, weary figure leaning against the sled. On a soft and mushy trail like this, where every footstep punched a hole in the loose snow, the dogs could not travel with any extra weight. A few miles farther down they would come to a main-traveled road and the going would be better. But till then she must walk. Macdonald gave way with a gesture of his hand and turned on his heel.

At the campfire Sheba dried her mukluks, stockings, caribou mitts and short skirts. Too tired to eat, she forced herself to swallow a few bites and drank eagerly some tea. Gordon had brought blankets from the sled and he persuaded her to lie down for a few minutes.

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hauling boys, maybe, but a man goes his ain gait even when he gets a bit ficer."

"Yes," she agreed. And in a flash she saw what would happen, that in the reaction from his depression he would turn to Genevieve Mallory and marry her.

"You're too young for me, anyhow—too soft and innocent. Once you told me that you couldn't keep step with me. It's true. You can't. It was a daft dream."

He took a deep breath, seemed to shake himself out of it, and smiled cheerfully upon her.

"We'll put our treasure-trove on the sled and go back to your friends," he continued briskly. "Tomorrow I'll send men up to scour the hills for Northrup's body."

Sheba drew the canvas back over the face of the dead man. As she followed Macdonald back to the trail, tears filled her eyes. She was remembering that had crept upon these men so swiftly had missed her by a hair's breadth. The strong, lusty life had been stricken out of the big Cornishman and probably of his partner in crime. Perhaps they had left mothers or wives or sweethearts to mourn them.

Macdonald relieved Elliot at breaking trail and the young man went back to the geep-ole. They had discarded mukluks and wore moccasins and snowshoes. It was hard, slow work, for the trail-breaker had to fight his way through snow along the best route he could find. The moon was high when at last they reached the roadhouse.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Diane Changes Her Mind.

The news of Sheba's safety had been telephoned to Diane from the roadhouse, so that all the family from Peter down were on the porch to welcome her with mingled tears and kisses. Since Gordon had to push on to the hospital to have Holt taken care of, it was Macdonald who brought the girl home. The mine-owner declined rather brusquely an invitation to stay to dinner on the plea that he had business at the office which would not wait.

Impulsively Sheba held out both her hands to him. "Believe me, I am thanking you with the whole of my heart, my friend. And I'm praying for you the old Irish blessing. 'God save you kindly!'"

The deep-set, rapacious eyes of the Scotsman burned into hers for an instant. Without a word he released her hands and turned away.

Her eyes followed him, a vital, dynamic American who would do big, lawless things to the day of his death. She sighed. He had been a great figure in her life, and now he had passed out of it.

As soon as she was alone with Diane, her Irish cousin dropped the little bomb she had up her sleeve.

"I'm going to be married Thursday, Di."

Mrs. Paget embraced her for the tenth time within an hour. She was very fond of Sheba, and she had been on a great strain concerning her safety. That out of her danger had resulted the engagement Diane had hoped for was surplusage of good luck.

"You lucky, sensible girl."