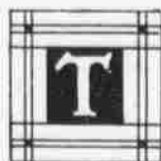


# THE WEIGHT OF OBLIGATION

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THIS IS THE STORY of a burden, the tale of a load that irked a strong man's shoulders. To those who do not know the North it may seem strange, but to those who understand the humors of men in solitude, and the extravagant vagaries that steal in upon their minds, as fog drifts with the night, it will not appear unusual. There are spirits in the wilderness, eerie forces which play pranks, some droll or whimsical, and others that are grim.

Johnny Cantwell and Mortimer Grant were partners, trail-mates, brothers in soul if not in blood. The ebb and flood of frontier life had brought them together, its hardships had united them until they were as one. They were something of a mystery to each other, neither having surrendered all his confidence, and because of this they retained their mutual attraction. Had they known each other fully, had they thoroughly sounded each other's depths they would have lost interest just like husbands and wives who give themselves too freely and reserve nothing.

They had met by accident, but they remained together by desire, and so satisfactory was the union that not even the jealousy of women had come between them. There had been women, of course, just as there had been adventures of other sorts, but the love of the partners was larger and finer than anything they had experienced. They were young, strong men, and the world was full of sweethearts; but where was there a partnership like theirs? they asked themselves.

The spirit of adventure bubbled merrily within them, too, and it led them into curious byways. It was this which sent them northward from the States in the dead of winter, on the heels of the Stony River strike; it was this which induced them to land at Katmai instead of Iliamna, whence their land journey should have commenced.

"There are two routes over the coast range," the Captain of the Dora told them, "and only two. Iliamna Pass is low and easy, but the distance is longer than by way of Katmai. I can land you at either place."

"Katmai is pretty tough, isn't it?" Grant inquired.

"We've understood it's the worst pass in Alaska," Cantwell's eyes were eager.

"It's a heller! Nobody travels it except natives, and they don't like it. Now, Iliamna—"

"We'll try Katmai. Eh, Mort?"

"Sure! They don't come hard enough for us, Cap. We'll see if it's as bad as it's painted."

So, one gray January morning they were landed on a frozen beach, their outfit was flung ashore through the surf, the lifeboat pulled away, and the Dora disappeared after a farewell toot of her whistle. Their last glimpse of her showed the Captain waving good-bye and the purser flapping a red tablecloth at them from the after-deck.

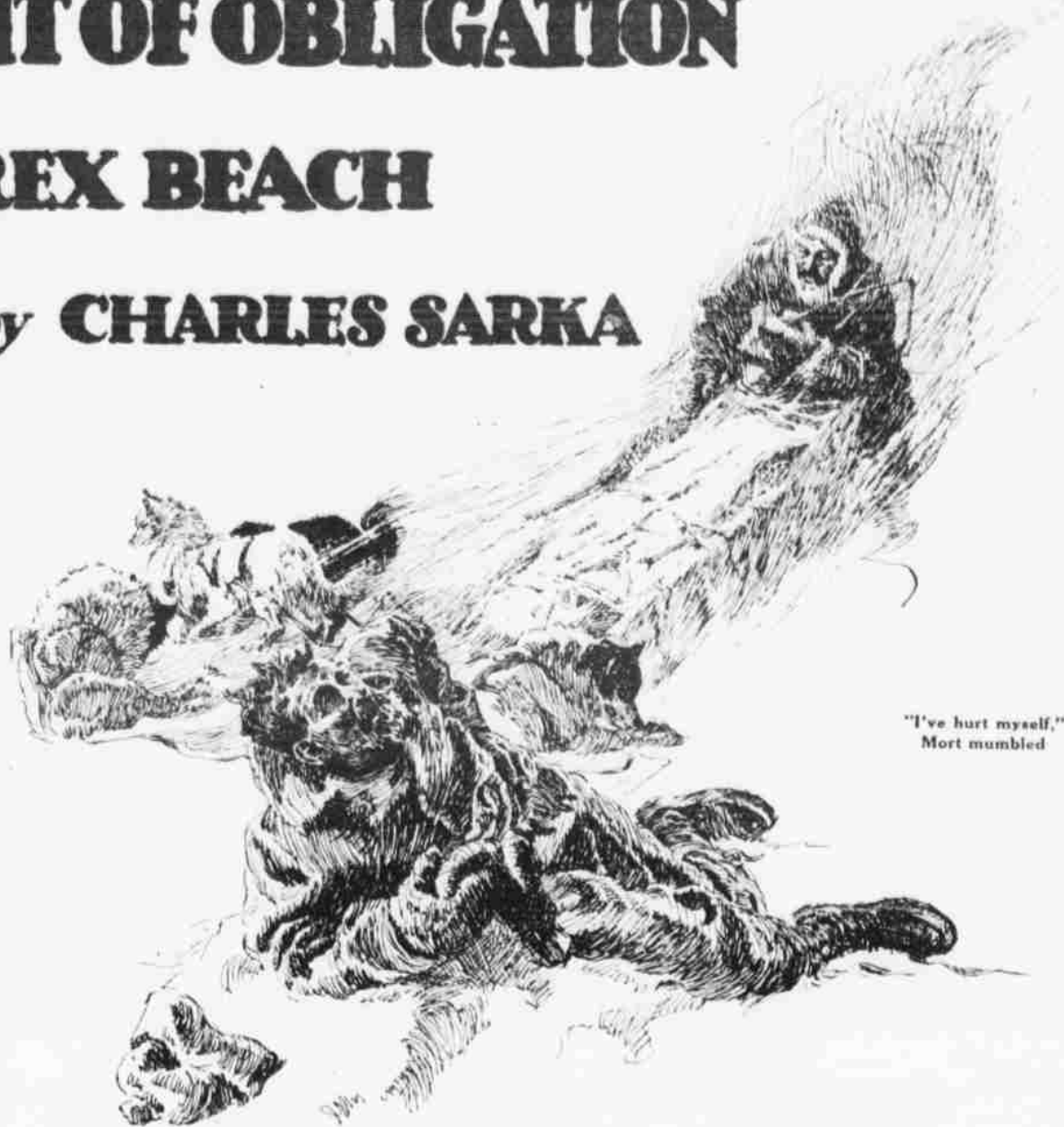
"Cheerful place, this," Grant remarked, as he noted the desolate surroundings of dune and hillside. The beach itself was black and raw where the surf washed it, but elsewhere all was white, save for the thickets of alder and willow which protruded nakedly. The bay was little more than a hollow, scooped out of the Alaskan Range; along the foothills behind there was a belt of spruce and cottonwood and birch. It was a lonely and apparently unpeopled wilderness in which they had been set down.

"Seems good to be back in the North again, doesn't it?" said Cantwell cheerily. "I'm tired of the carousing, and the street cars, and the dames, and all that civilized stuff. I'd rather be broke in Alaska—with you—than a banker's son, back home."

SOON a globular Russian half-breed, the Katmai trader, appeared among the dunes and with him were some native villagers. That night the partners slept in a snug log cabin the roof of which was chained down with old ship's cables. Petellin, the fat little trader, explained that roofs in Katmai had a way of sailing off to seaward when the wind blew. He listened to their plan of crossing the divide and nodded.

It could be done, of course, he agreed; but they were foolish to try it, when the Iliamna route was open. Still, now that they were here he would find dogs for them, and a guide. The village hunters were out after meat, however, and until they returned the white men would need to wait in patience.

There followed several days of idleness during which Cantwell and Grant amused themselves around the village, teasing the squaws, playing games with



"I've hurt myself,"  
Mort mumbled

the boys and flirting harmlessly with the girls, one of whom, in particular, was not unattractive. She was perhaps three-quarters Aleut, the other quarter being plain coquette, and having been educated at the town of Kodiak she knew the ways and the wiles of the white man.

Cantwell approached her and she met his extravagant advances more than half way. They were getting along nicely together when Grant, in a spirit of fun, entered the game and won her fickle smiles for himself. He joked his partner unmercifully and Johnny accepted defeat gracefully, never giving the matter a second thought.

WHEN the hunters returned, dogs were bought, a guide was hired, and a week after landing the friends were camped at timber line awaiting a favorable moment for their dash across the range. Above them, white hillsides rose in irregular leaps to the gash in the saw-toothed barrier which formed the pass; below them, a short valley led down to Katmai and the sea. The day was bright, the air clear; nevertheless, after the guide had stared up at the peaks for a time, he shook his head, then re-entered the tent and lay down. The mountains were "smoking"; from their tops streamed a gossamer veil which the travelers knew to be drifting snow clouds carried by the wind. It meant delay, but they were patient.

They were up and going on the following morning, however, with the Indian in the lead. There was no trail, the hills were steep. In places they were forced to unload the sled and hoist their outfit by means of ropes, and as they mounted higher the snow deepened. It lay like loose sand, only lighter; it shoved ahead of the sled in a feathery mass; the dogs wallowed in it and were unable to pull, hence the greater part of the work devolved upon the men. Once above the foothills and into the range proper, the going became more level, but the snow remained knee deep.

The Indian broke trail stolidly; the partners strained at the sled which hung back like a leaden thing. By afternoon the dogs had become disheartened and refused to heed the whip. There was neither fuel, nor running water, and therefore the party did not pause for luncheon. The men were sweating profusely from their exertions and had long since become parched with thirst, but the dry snow was like chalk and scoured their throats.

Cantwell was the first to show the effects of his unusual exertions, for not only had he assumed a lion's share of the work, but the last few months of easy living had softened his muscles, and in consequence his vitality was quickly spent. His undergarments were drenched; he was fearfully dry inside; a terrible thirst seemed to penetrate his whole body; he was forced to rest frequently.

Grant eyed him with some concern, finally inquiring:

"Feel bad, Johnny?"

Cantwell nodded. Their fatigue made both men economical of language.

"What's the matter?"

"Thirsty!" The former could barely speak.

"There won't be any water till we get across. You'll have to stand it."

They resumed their duties; the Indian "swish-swished" ahead, as if wading