

THE STORY THUS FAR

SIX bandits come aboard the steamer, "Midnight Sun," while she is tied to the bank of the Mackenzie. Father Claverly and the other passengers on the boat are amazed at the sight of banditry in this Great Waterways country, a thousand miles north of Edmonton. Jimmy Montgomery, who had spent years with the Canadian Mounted, draws his gun in the face of the covering rifles and fires upon the ruffians. He is shot through the heart by a half-breed. The bandits get away with gold dust and choice peltry.

Corporal Bill Hardsock brings the news of the crime to Sergeant Alan Baker at the Mounted Police post at Fort Endurance. After a brief dispute over plans with his incompetent superior, Inspector Haskell, Alan starts out after the bandits in the big police launch with the corporal and four constables.

Reaching the Midnight Sun, they stop long enough for Alan to board her and consult witnesses of the crime. Alan asks the skipper to put Jimmy Montgomery's orphaned four-year-old daughter off at Fort Endurance and leave her in the care of Alan's fiancée, Elizabeth Spaulding. At the MacMillan trading post on the Big Aloska, Joyce MacMillan is alone, awaiting the return of Dave, her father, from a fur-buying trip. She is thrilled when the police launch ties up there for the night, as she has not seen Alan Baker for months. Secretly she had hoped to marry him, then she was stunned by the news of his engagement to Elizabeth. She is happy now to perceive from his halting talk that the planned marriage is not definitely certain.

CHAPTER IV

RIFLES IN THE PROW

DURING the meal, as Joyce sat at the head of the table pouring coffee and watching a pan of biscuit in the stove, Alan kept studying her, wondering how any girl could stand the isolation and poverty and lonely battle she was enduring. Two whole years here, two years out of her young womanhood, the choice time of her life, sacrificed at this isolated trading post, giving up everything that a girl holds dear! She was too fine to be leading a life like this. She ought to get out of it. There was a limit to her bravery and spirited strength.

As the men were pushing back their chairs and reaching for pipes, he felt some one prodding him with a boot under the table. Looking up, he saw Larry elevate an eyebrow at him.

"Wants to talk with me alone," Alan surmised; and he gave Larry a slight nod. To the other men he said rather sharply: "You men, put away your pipes and police up these dishes. Don't leave a stack like this for Joyce. Bill, you see to that."

Casually going outside a few moments later, he glanced around and saw Larry waiting for him a dozen yards away, over near the storage shed. Sauntering across, he asked quietly:

"What's up now, Larry?" Larry flipped his cigarette aside. "Come in here with me, Alan. I want to show you something."

Producing a pocket flash, he played its yellow shaft upon a pack of furs on a low shelf.

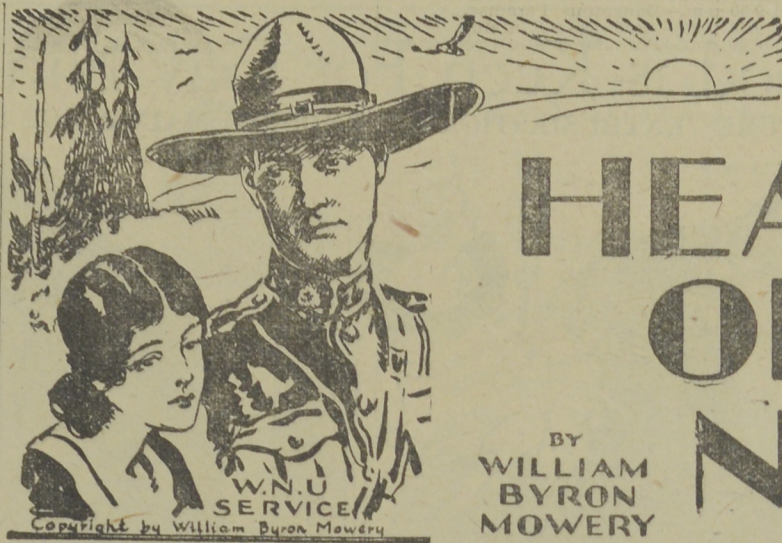
"Alan, you see that wolf skin they're wrapped in? That's what caught my eye. It's a Yukon animal, probably from the Kayukuk headwaters in the Endicott mountains. It made me curious, so I pried into the pack and saw these dark otter. They came from the Yukon, too. I thought to myself, 'there's no wolf or otter like them in Dave MacMillan's trading territory.' But say, Alan, look—(hold the flash a minute)—look here." Larry pulled out several of the rich, dark-gleaming otter pelts and rolled back the fur at the broad end. "Take a good look at them blue stamp marks."

Alan bent closer and he suddenly gasped.

"Good Lord! They're L. and H. furs! What're they doing here, Larry—in Dave MacMillan's possession?"

"Stolen! What else? What's more to us, Alan, I checked on them serial numbers, and this bunch is one of the packs stolen from the Midnight Sun!" He added slowly: "Maybe we don't know yet who them six strangers are, but now we surer'n h—l know who's directing 'em!"

In low tones, there in the darkness, they talked the situation over.



HEART OF THE NORTH

BY WILLIAM BYRON MOWERY

Larry finally asked: "You're going to arrest him, Alan? An accomplice that way, even if he didn't have a hand in the actual killing, they'll give him the limit. It'll be h—l on Joyce."

Alan stirred. His voice was torn with pain. "I don't know what I'll . . . But I'll have to do something about it."

After a little silence he directed: "Larry, you go down and re-



Without a word of reply or self-protection he took all she had to tell him.

lieve Ped. Don't tell these other men anything about this yet."

When Larry had gone, Alan left the musty-smelling shed, and walked up along the side of the trading hall to Joyce's window. As he came up, purposely cracking a stick, he had a glimpse of her whole room. Its furniture was a dresser, a chair originally straight but with a pair of rockers fitted to it, a sheet-iron stove with woodbox against the wall, and a bed which he knew had been a condemned barracks cot. But Joyce had somehow lifted the bleak room almost to cheeriness. There were birchbark creels of great-spurred violets and Arctic primulas and adder's-tongue on the dresser, some sprigs of bright-red berries above it, a wolf-rug across the foot of the bed, and on the dresser a picture of himself, of her former employer down in Ottawa, of her dad and mother.

She had heard him and turned toward the window and recognized him in the weak light.

He said: "Joyce, I've got to talk with you. Maybe you'd better come out here where we'll be alone."

She stepped to the window.

As Alan helped her down, trying to say lightly, "It's unlucky, Joyce, to come through a window that way," he felt the hard bulge of that little bulldog automatic pressed against him. At least his gift was still protection to her.

He suggested: "Let's go a little farther away, Joyce. I don't want that long-eared Whipple over hearing this."

Rather aimlessly, he led her a stone-toss west of the storage shed to a little clear place in the spruces. Trying to prepare her in some measure, he told her of Larry going into the shed, happening to notice a strange pack of furs, examining them, seeing the L. & H. marks and the serial numbers. He hesitated a moment

then, with Joyce frowning perplexedly at those strange furs being in the shed; but there was no mercy possible now, and he took the final step.

"Joyce, I hate myself for telling you this. But you've got to know. Those furs in your father's shed are one of the packs stolen from the Midnight Sun."

"Stolen? From the Midnight Sun? But Alan! What—what's it doing here?"

"This afternoon while you were asleep, Joyce, your father, or else one of these bandits, put the furs in there. That pack is—it must be his share in the arrangement. Joyce, your father is somehow connected with these bandits."

Realization came slowly to Joyce. Then sharply, like an instinctive defense, came passionate disbelief and anger; and she drew a little away from him.

"I'm sorry, sorry," he said in heartfelt sympathy. "Your father used to be my friend. And he's your father; that's what hurts the worst."

Joyce drew still farther back from him, with her eyes flashing, with a defiant toss of her head. He believed her father guilty! He had gone prying around for evidence! He was blind! Heartless! A man-hunting wolf! Inhuman! Worse. . .

Alan was thoroughly surprised. He had seen Joyce handle insolent Indians and breeds, shooting their dialects at them like fluted Yellowknife arrows; but with him, with Bill, with her father, she had always been as quiet as a summer wind. The way she was assailing him now, defending her father, revealed a new depth to her nature.

Without a word of reply or self-protection, he took all she had to tell him. He felt that her anger was not so much against him personally as against the inexorable duty he represented.

"Joyce, please don't," he begged. "Please listen, maybe I am inhuman and a wolf, and've got sawdust where my brains ought to be. But also I'm . . . Don't you understand how I'm between the devil and the deep sea?"

She looked up, with tears still glistening on her cheeks.

"Alan, I don't believe—oh, I can't believe—about that pack. Alan, say it isn't so!"

Her bewildered misery tugged at Alan. He wanted to comfort her with some lie. But he dared not build up any hope, for he knew it would only prove a tragic disappointment to her in the end.

"Joyce, we've got to believe. The pack is there. No use going over to see if it is. Larry and I made no mistake. We mustn't blind ourselves to the truth."

She suggested eagerly: "Don't you think these furs might have got there some way besides—besides. . . Alan! Don't you see?—that pack was planted there! Those men knew you'd find it, and stop, and investigate, and arrest my dad! That would give them time and chance to escape."

As gently as he could, Alan interrupted her. "No, Joyce, Your dad wasn't framed, Larry and I talked that possibility over. If those men had reasoned as you suggest, they'd have put the furs in a conspicuous place where we'd have been sure to find them. The pack wasn't planted. Let's not delude ourselves.

"Joyce, let's try to look at the

evidence as others will see it. Your father is absent, and has been for four days, just at this particular time. There is the question of these bandits being strangers and yet getting about this country so well. There's a fact that he was bitter against the big companies and probably was tempted to retaliate against them in the only way in his power. "And, Joyce, there's the bale of furs; that evidence alone is enough to prove a connection."

Joyce listened to him piling up the evidence, but the entire staggering total of it did not sway her. Against it she set all she knew of her father's nature. In her whole life she had never seen him enter a penny of false debt against the most ignorant Indian, or deviate a hair's breadth from his word of honor. She often had thought that the only person in the world her dad had ever wronged was himself. Though he had been drinking heavily and taking up with none-too-unwilling Indian women, it seemed contrary to his whole nature to plot with bandits, to gang with murderers.

As Alan finished his reluctant indictment, her resolve hardened. . . She was going to fight for her father and defend him with every weapon in her power.

One way shot into her mind. Her proud head dropped a little, and she asked hesitantly: "Alan, do you have to arrest him? Only you and Mr. Younge and I know about these furs being here. If you could—if we could some way cover it up—"

She checked the plea. She could not bring herself to put Alan in so fearful a dilemma. Looking up, she met his gaze squarely again. "No, I can't ask that of you. I'd never ask that."

He chose his words very carefully. "The question with me, Joyce, is this: How deeply is your father involved? I can't



They came up within a hundred yards of their quarry.

think he'd go the whole length with these bandits. I can't think he'd countenance murder or even so brazen a robbery as these men staged. Perhaps they deluded him about their intentions. If they're

Joyce blanched at the last word, at the specter it aroused. Her father stood charged with murder. In her heart the Law suddenly became a tangible and fearsome caught, they're going to lie and

throw as much of the blame on him as they can. But if I can have the truth as a working basis, I can nail their lies. We can't hope to save him from a penalty, but we maybe can save him from the—the worst."

Alan went on: "You stand a better chance of getting the truth from him than I do, Joyce. He'd suspect me if I tried to talk to him. But with you he'd be more frank and open. When he comes in, won't you try to find out what you can?"

"You mean I'm to watch him and gather what hints I can, and perhaps ask questions that seem innocent?"

"That's exactly it, Joyce. Exactly what I meant. If you'll do that for me, if you'll help me that much . . . Joyce, don't you see why I told you this? Don't you see it's because I'm going to stick with you? I won't see your dad railroaded. I'll help him to the limit I can—because he's your father."

He was facing her in the ghostly morning light. Again he was conscious that his four months of absence, breaking the friendship between them, had invested her with an aura of strangeness to him; and that all during this brief fateful visit he had become aware of her in a quickened sense. How brave and comradely a girl! And in spite of her hard life here, in spite of her efforts to be a good bush-loper, how winsome and girlish and adorable she was!

Unwilling to detain him, Joyce offered him her hand, wishing him success today, hiding her fears for him when he should come up with these men. Alan bent nearer her, he bent down a little to kiss her, as more than once he had done in the years past. It was an impulsive act; he was swept by admiration of her bravery, of her girlish prettiness. And it was a humble act of contrition, too, and self-reproach; for he had said to himself that if he had kept up his visits here, instead of leaving Joyce all alone to the battle, he might have halted Dave MacMillan's plunge into crime.

She went with him down to the wharf and stood watching the patrol embark. At the first bend above, he turned to look back. Vaguely through the mist he saw Joyce still standing on the wharf in the grey chill of earliest morning. He waved to her and caught the tiny white of her kerchief answering.

When the mist had hidden her from him, he turned his eyes ahead. Somewhere on up the spruce-buried Aloska were those six bandit strangers, rifle armed and desperate and certain to give battle. Against them he was pitting his life and the lives of his men today.

Fifty miles above the MacMillan trading store, Alan ordered Pedneault to swerve in toward the north bank and stop.

He believed those bandits could not be very far ahead now. Across this silent wilderness the roar of the launch's engine carried for five or six miles. Warned of pursuit, those criminals might lift their canoes back into the timber and let the police go harmlessly past. Likelier still, they might lay an ambush where the river was narrow, and open on the launch with repeating rifles at a murderous point-blank range. But if he located them on up-stream, he could slip upon them quietly in the paddle craft and lay a deadly ambush himself.

Taking a pair of binoculars he splashed ashore and hurried up a hill to its summit. There he had a clear view of a long river "straight" reaching twenty miles up-stream.

He moved his glasses slowly up-stream, praying for a glimpse of those two outlaw canoes. Carefully focusing, he scrutinized the river, the banks on either side with their little curves and hollows, and searched above the trees for a wisp of camp smoke. Nothing, nothing whatsoever, of two creeping black dots. The bandits were 20 miles ahead at least.

As he hurried back down to the launch, he began to realize that those two canoes had travelled more swiftly than he had thought possible. For the first time in his

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