

# TRIMMED

By William S'avens McNutt, in Ainslee's.

Continued from last week.

Blackie went away partially comforted. Smith owned the finest dog team in the entire country, and it was conceivable that she might have wanted to ride behind it. A vague sense of misgiving troubled him, however.

'Dog-gone!' he muttered as he sat on the edge of his bunk, undressing, that night. 'I may be a darn old woman, but it don't look real right to me somehow. No, sir!'

The next morning Tom showed up at the store. Alganik met him with an anxious face.

'There's something maybe you'd ought to know,' he confided. 'Nellie—she's lit out with that guy Smith.'

Tom stared: 'Lit—lit out?' he questioned blankly. 'What--what d'ye mean?'

'Skipped,' Alganik elucidated. 'Bown the works. Hiked for the outside with him on a honeymoon tour.'

Tom wet his lips and swallowed hard. 'I—I don't believe it!' he said hoarsely. 'It's a lie! Why, she was here—'

'Don't look reasonable,' Alganik agreed. 'But when she didn't gnt in by midnight last night I went over to her shack, and found this note pinned to her pillow.'

He handed Tom a note. It read:

'Dear Brother: When you read this I will probably be far on my way to the States. I am going with Smith. We love each other, and will be married by the missionary at Bethel. It will be silly for you to follow and try and over take me. We have the best team in the country and a good start. Good bye, and luck, and love.

'Nellie.'

'It's a lie!' Tom croaked when he heard. 'I--I don't believe it!' he said what she wrote. 'Why, she was--'

'No ice anything peculiar about the handwriting?' Alganik interrupted.

'Peculiar? Why, it looks a little shaky an' like's if--By the Lord--that's it! It ain't her handwritin'! It's a forgery! That skunk Smith--'

'Just what I think,' Alganik agreed. 'I don't believe that's her handwritin' though it's a fair imitation of it. Smith--he's gone an'--'

'He's kidnapped her, an' left this note so's to keep any of us from tryin' to follow him up,' Tom declared excitedly. 'I knowed the thing was a lie. Why, she--'

'S-h-h-h-h!' Alganik warped suddenly. 'Here comes Blackie. Easy, now, Tom! Don't you--'

Tom stepped to the door with his hands held high over his head. Blackie, a few steps down the street, crouched with his hand on his hip.

'Nix on that stuff!' Tom warned sharply. 'Not now. Listen to what I've got to say to you first.'

He approached the wary Blackie with his hands still held high. In one he grasped the note.

'Read it,' he said shortly, handing it to the little man and raising his hand again.

Blackie read. 'Lie!' he yelled. 'She ain't done no such thing! Why, she was--'

'I know she ain't,' Tom interrupted him. 'That's what I'm goin' to talk to you about. Smith--he forged that note an' kidnapped her. He left that here so's we wouldn't make no

try to follow him?'

'I knowed it!' Blackie wailed. 'I knowed last night that somethin' or other in this deal was crooked.'

'He's got the best team in the land, an' he's some real musher,' Tom said. 'He's some handicapped by havin' her to tote alone with him, but he'll be hard to catch. There ain't no two men in the camp can work on the trail like you an' me I reckon we team together till this job's done, an' tend to our shootin' later, huh?'

'Get packed,' Blackie answered shortly. 'We can get Dutch Louie's dogs an' sleds for fifteen hundred. It's the best mushin' outfit left in camp. You pay half.'

'Sure! Make the dicker an' we'll pack an' hike.'

Blackie scurried away to secure the team, and Tom returned to the store.

'We'll get 'em,' he assured Alganik grimly. 'You better not try to go along. You'd never keep in sight o' me an' Blackie, an' we ain't goin' to have no time to wait for nobody.'

'Bett r make right sure o' how things stand before you start any shooting,' Alganik called after him anxiously. 'We ain't right sure that note was forged. You'd better--'

'We'll manage it proper,' Tom assured him, and hurried out.

Half an hour later, with a sled packed light and drawn by eight of the best dogs in the country next to those of the man they were pursuing, Blackie and Tom swung out of town, partners once more in the arduous trail work they know so well and worked at together with such automatic precision and thorough understanding, one of the other, that miles a day were added to the distance travelled by any team that drove over

what could be accomplished by the same team with less expert handling.

For eight days they travelled without speaking. Both of them knew that the river was near to the break-up but neither spoke of it. Ten days out, and one hundred and fifty miles from Bethel, the ice started.

It was in the early morning, and the two men were asleep in their camp in a clump of shrub pine on the first beeh of the river bank. The crunching, grinding roar of the moving ice brought both out of their bags to stare at a wonderful sight. Great blocks of ice, some of them a hundred feet square, were moving with the current swirling about in a titanic commotion. Now and then the current would jam momentarily, and the large blocks, crashing into the barrier from behind, would rear on end, standing out of the water fifty and sixty feet. Oncoming blocks would crash into the upended mass, and it would explode with a sharp roar into dozens of great, gleaming fragments of flying ice that snowed down onto the jam and drove with great splashes of spray into the clear water in front of it. Then the pressure from behind would become great enough to break the jam and the whole of it would go out with a reverberating detonation, the while great cakes of ice were thrown high in the air; and the frozen, swirling procession down the river with the swift current would begin once more.

All that morning the thunder of breaking jams roared in their ears as they would down along the river bank. It was nearing noon when they came upon a trapper's cabin. A hairy bearded man standing in the doorway greeted them.

'Country's gettin' crowded,' he observed as they drove up. 'Man can't have no more privacy at all. Man an' a woman blowed in las' night an' et with me; now you guys come along an' bother.'

'Man an' woman?' Blackie questioned eagerly. 'Las' night?'

'Yeh. I reckon they'd camped with me for the night, but they was hoin' to make it across the river 'for she broke up. Didn't cross none too soon, did they?'

Blackie and Tom turned and gazed at the swirling, grinding chaos of great ice cakes that separated them from the opposite bank. Then they looked at, one another and the eyes of each held a question. Blackie answered it.

'Not a chance,' he said decidedly. 'No way o' gettin' across, an' she may be days before she clears enough to make it in a boat.'

'Find a jam stuck tight enough to give you a chance for your white alley, an' make it across in the clear water just below,' Tom suggested.

Blackie snorted. 'Find a place was jammed tight enough an' then build a boat--'

He stared moodily out over the river. 'She'll jam right here if that big cake on the other side there turns sideways an' sticks before--She's turnin'! See that? That'll jam her in this curve, sure. She's stuck! I know it! She's jammin'!'

He turned excitedly to Tom. 'This guy's got a 'shovel nose' up on the roof there. If she'll hold water--'

Tom sprang forward the cabin. 'Help me down with her,' he cried grabbing one end of the boat on the low eaves of the cabin. 'It ain't more'n a hundred an' fifty yards across. As soon as she clears in front o' the jam, we'll--'

'Down with her!' Blackie shouted back jubilantly, grabbing the other end of the boat. 'We'll go!'

'That's my boat you're handlin', the trapper observed mildly, 'an' she's worth a hundred an' fifty, but I'll just chip her in for the privilege o' seein' you two fools die a queer death. That little jam's liable to go out any minute.'

The ice barrier was growing larger. Great cakes crashing into it from behind upended and broke, or were forced up onto it, adding to its height. The roar of the great masses grinding together made speech useless. In front of it the water was already nearly free from ice the entire way across the river.

The two men hurried the boat down the bank and slid it off the shore ice into the clear water just under the face of the jam. Then they carried down grub and their tent from the sled, and with Tom at the oars, Blackie shoved off.

The trapper stood in the doorway of his cabin, smoking and watching the boat's progress speculatively.

The boat was nearly in the middle of the channel before the thing he looked for happened. With a swelling roar, the great jam broke. He saw Tom turn the boat and its nose fair against, the rugged ice wall that towered high above. He saw the two men leap out upon a projecting flat cake

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and scramble up to the top of the barrier, leaping from cake to cake as the whole mass began to move.

He saw a great block on which both men lit for a moment on their wild flight back toward the shore forced upward by the pressure, suddenly shoot high into the air. The men were lifted and thrown from it like two tiny pellets shot from some mighty catapult.

One of them rose and started his mad run again; the other lay quiet on the top of the huge, gradually tilting block of ice on which he had dropped.

The man who still ran was Tom. After a moment he stopped, looked back, and, turning, retraced his way toward where Blackie lay still.

The trapper in the doorway shook his head.

'Might o' made it if he'd o' kep' on,' he observed to himself judicially. 'Knowed he was a fool.'

Tom reached the unconscious Blackie, and, with a quick heave, slung the limp form over his shoulder. Then he turned, and, leaning forward under his burden, started once more on his seemingly hopeless journey toward the shore, 'seventy-five yards away.

The jam was fairly broken now. On every side of the leaping man great blocks of the tortured ice shot high into the air and crashed down all about him. That he was not crushed was a miracle. Leaping from moving cake to moving cake stumbling, falling; dodging the flying ice, by a miracle he reached the shore and staggered up to the bank.

The imperturbable trapper came down from his cabin to meet him, and helped him up the bank with Blackie. Arrived at the door, they turned and looked back. The jam was gone. Where Tom had made his way back to the shore from the centre of the river was a swirling procession of ice cakes with larger stretches of open water between them that no man could have negotiated.

'Knowed you was a fool,' the trapper commenced as they laid Blackie on the bank. 'The Almighty takes care o' fools that ain't got the sense to look out for themselves. No man livin' could a' come in over that muss the way you did on his own brains an' feet. You're a fool, an' you was took care of accordin'.'

Blackie was not badly hurt. His ankle was sprained severely, and his head was gashed and bruised just back of one ear. He was conscious when they laid him out in the cabin.

'I wasn't clear out,' he said huskily to Tom, as the latter sat on the side of the bunk, basking the injured head. 'I couldn't move, but I knew what you were doin'. You sure saved my life--old-timer.'

'What about it?' Tom demanded. 'You'd 'a' done it for me, wouldn't you?'

'Why, sure!' said Blackie simply.

'Well, then?' said Tom.

'I can't mush on this leg,' Blackie began, after a time. 'You'll have to hike out alone.'

'I reckon so,' Tom answered, without any show of enthusiasm.

'Say,' Blackie exploded suddenly. 'I ain't goin' to marry Miss Porter. Not nohow. All of a sudden I don't seem to care a whole lot about it. You go to it. She promised to marry me, but I know she--'

'She did,' Tom yelled. Why, she promised to marry me!'

The two men stared vacuously at one another.

'S-say, did--did she borrow some money from you?' Blackie inquired, after a moment.

'Three thousand dollars,' Tom admitted sheepishly.

Continued on page,

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