A Mystery Story for Girls

A TICKET TO ADVENTURE

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By
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CHAPTER I
THE LITTLE MAN IN BLACK

Mary Hughes had walked the entire length of the long dock at Anchorage, Alaska. Now, having rounded a great pile of merchandise, tents, tractors, groceries, hammers, axes, and boxes of chocolate bars she came quite suddenly upon the oddest little man she had ever seen. Even for a girl in her late teens, Mary was short and slender. This man was no larger than she.

“A Japanese,” she thought as her surprised eyes took in his tight-fitting black suit, his stiff collar and bright tie. “But no, a Jap wouldn’t look like that.” She was puzzled and curious. At that particular moment, she had nothing to do but indulge her curiosity.

Together with hundreds of other “home-seekers”—she smiled as she thought of herself as a home-seeker—she had been dumped into the bleak Arctic morning. Some of the goods that were being hoisted by a long steel crane from the depths of a ship, belonged to Mary, to Mark her brother, and to Florence Huyler her cousin. There was, for the time, nothing they could do about that. So—

“I am Mister Il-ay-ok.”

To her surprise, she heard the little man addressing her.

“Oh,” she breathed. She was thinking, “Now perhaps I am to know about this little man.” She was, but not too much—at least not for some time.

“Oh! So you are Mr. Il-ay-ok,” she encouraged. “Is this your home?”

“Oh no, no indeed!” He spoke as if he were reading from a book. “My home is quite distant. North,” he pointed away.

“Then you—”

Mary did not finish. At that instant a loud, harsh-sounding voice broke in upon them. “Mister Il-ay-ok! MISTER! Har! Har! Har! That’s good!” The man who had made his appearance, as if by magic, from the great pile of merchandise, where he had, the girl thought with an inward shudder, been hiding, burst into a roar of hoarse laughter. To say that Mary was surprised and startled would not express it at all.

She looked at him in silent alarm. He too was strange. He was a white man with a back so straight you might have run a yard stick up it and made it touch at every point. He had a horse-like nose, very long and straight. There was something about his whole bearing that made Mary want to slap him. She would, too, had she felt that the occasion warranted it. She was little, was Mary, but her snapping black eyes could shoot fire. Those slender brown legs of hers, hidden for the moment by brown slacks, and her steel-spring-like arms were made for action.

Mary could, at times, be quite still as well. A cat is like that. Just now she stood quite still and waited.

“So you are Mister Il-ay-ok, now, eh, Tony?” The stranger stopped laughing to pucker his brow into a scowl that did not improve his appearance.

“Shouldn’t want to meet him in the dark!” the girl thought with another shudder.

“Want to know what he is, Miss?” the white man turned to Mary. “He’s an Eskimo.”

“Oh, an—” Mary was surprised and pleased. She was not allowed to go on.

“Yup, Miss, an Es-ki-mo.” The man filled his voice with suggestions of loathing and utmost contempt. “Just an oil-guzzling, blubber-eating, greasy Eskimo that lives in a hole in the ground. That’s what he is to me. But to you he’s Mister Il-ay-ok. Bah!” The man turned and walked away.

For a full moment nothing further was said. At last, in a steady, school-book voice the little man in black said, “Do you know what my people did to the first white man who visit our village?”

“No. What?” Mary stared.

“Shot him,” the little man’s voice dropped. “Shot him with a whale gun. Very big gun. Shoot big shell. Like this!” He held up a clenched fist. “Very bad man like this one. He talked too big,” the little man scowled.

“And would you like to shoot that one?” Mary asked, nodding toward the retreating figure.

“Not now. Mebby byum bye. You see,” the little man smiled, “I go to visit your country. I am—”

At that moment Florence Huyler, Mary’s big cousin came booming along from behind the pile of goods, to cry: “Ah! There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Florence,” Mary stopped her, “this is Mr. Il-ay-ok. He’s from Alaska, and he wants to kill a white man, but not just now.” She laughed in spite of herself.

“But this is Alaska.” Florence, who was big and strong as a man, looked at the little man and smiled as she asked, “Is this your home?”

“No—no,” the little man bowed. “Much more north my home. Cape Nome sometimes and sometimes Cape Prince Wales.”

“Oh you’ve been in Nome?” Florence’s eyes shone. “My grandfather went there years and years ago. He never came back.”

“Name please?” the little man asked.

“Tom Kennedy.”

“Ah yes,” the little man beamed. “I know him. Big man. Very good man.”

“What?” the big girl’s eyes fairly bulged. “You, you know my grandfather? No! No! He is dead. He must have died years ago.”

“Not dead please. Tom Kennedy not dead,” the little man appeared puzzled. “No not dead. Let me tell you.” He took a step toward them. “Very big man. Very straight. Always smile. Let me show you.” To their vast surprise the girls saw the little man produce from an inside pocket a small, ivory paper knife. On its blade had been carved the likeness of a man’s face. It may not have been a very

accurate picture, there was, however, one touch that could not be wrong, a scar above the left eye. “Tom Kennedy my friend,” the native said simply.

“Tom Kennedy, my long-lost grandfather!” Florence stared in unbelief. “He is dead. And yet, he—he must be alive!” She closed her eyes as she tried to think clearly. Often and often as a small child she had heard her mother describe this man, her grandfather. Often too she had seen his picture. Always there had been that scar over the left eye.

“Mary!” she exclaimed, her voice rising high. “My grandfather is alive, somewhere away up there!” she faced north. “I’m going.”

“Oh, but you couldn’t leave us!” Mary’s tone vibrated with consternation. “You couldn’t leave us, not just now!”

“That—that’s right. I couldn’t—not just now.” The big girl’s hands dropped limply to her side.

From the distance came the long drawn hoarse hoot of a steamboat whistle.

“Excuse please,” the little man who called himself Mr. Il-ay-ok bowed low. “My boat please. I go to visit America. Perhaps please, we meet again.”

With the swift, sure movement of one who has followed a dog team over long, long miles or has hunted on the treacherous ice-floes, he was gone.

“No,” Florence repeated slowly as if to herself, “I can’t leave you now.”

For one full moment she stood staring at the spot from which the little man had vanished. Here indeed was a strange situation. All her life she had believed her grandfather dead. From her mother’s lips she had heard vague stories of how he had gone into the north and never returned. Now here was a little Eskimo saying, “Tom Kennedy my friend. Yes, I know him. He is alive.”

“And he proved it too,” the girl whispered to herself.

Then, of a sudden, her thoughts came back to the present and to her immediate surroundings.

“What a jumble!” she said, looking at the heap of goods that, as moments

passed, grew higher and higher. “How will they ever get them sorted out?”

Turning to her cousin, bright-eyed, eager Mary, she said: “‘A ticket to adventure,’ that’s what the man back there in San Francisco called it, ‘a ticket to adventure.’ Will it truly be an adventure? I wonder.”

“I hope so!” Mary’s eyes shone.

Turning, the two girls walked away toward a distant spot on the long dock where a boy, who had barely grown into a young man, was struggling at the task of setting up a small umbrella tent.

“See!” the big girl cried, “there’s Mark. He’s setting up our first home in a wilderness.”

CHAPTER II
THE INDIAN GIRL'S WARNING

Hours later Florence stirred uneasily in her sleep, then half-awake murmured dreamily: "A ticket to adventure. That's what he said, a ticket—"

Conscious now that some disturbing sound had come to her in her sleep, she shook herself into further wakefulness.

"Strange," she murmured. "Everything is so strange."

Indeed it was. The bed on which she and Mary slept was hard, a mattress on the dock. About her, shielding her from the Arctic wind was a tent.

"Tomorrow," she thought, "we start to the Promised Land." This land was the Matamuska Valley in Alaska. "Not far now, only a short way by rail. And then —" A thrill ran through her being. They were to be pioneers, modern pioneers, she and Mary, Mark and her aunt. What would life in this new land be?

She had seen much of life, had Florence, city life, country life, the wild beauty of Isle Royale in Lake Superior, and the finished beauty of France were not new to her. But Alaska! How she had thrilled at thought of it! She was thinking of all this when, of a sudden, she raised herself on one elbow to listen. "What was that sound?" she whispered. It was faint, indistinct, disturbing.

Then Mary sleeping at her side, did a strange thing. Sitting bolt upright she said: "Don't you want to kill him?"

For a space of seconds she appeared to listen for an answer. Then, with a sigh, she murmured, "Oh! All right. Some other time." At that, she sank back in her place to draw the covers closely about her.

"Talking in her sleep," the big girl thought. "Dreaming of the little man in black.

She—”

There was that sound again, more distinct now. “A child crying in the night.” Florence listened intently.

“It’s such a low cry,” she thought wearily, creeping back among the blankets. “It can’t be anything very much. There has been so much crying.”

Ah yes, there had been children’s cries that day; rough, unkind words had been said at times to the children. Little wonder, for they had that day—hundreds of men, women and children—disembarked from a ship that carried them far toward their promised land, the Matamuska Valley in Alaska.

They had been dumped quite unceremoniously, a whole shipload of people with cows, horses, dogs, cats, canaries, trucks, tractors, tents, lumber, hardware, groceries, shoes, hammers, saws, and clothespins on the dock at Anchorage. Men dashed about searching for tents and baggage. Women sought out lost or strayed pets. Children had cried and above it all had come the hoarse shout of some enthusiast: “On! On! to our new home! Three cheers for Alaska!”

Over all this darkness had fallen. After a cold supper, having pitched their tents and spread their blankets, they had stretched out on the rough surface of the dock to sleep, if sleep they could. And now Florence was hearing that distressing moan of a child.

“Near at hand,” she thought, raising herself on an elbow to listen once more, this time more closely. “A strange sort of cry. Can’t be a child from our party. I’ve heard them all cry.”

Indeed she had. The long journey half way across America, then along the coast to Alaska had been hard on the children.

“A ticket to adventure,” she whispered once again. They had come here, their little party of four, to begin life anew, to secure for themselves a home and if possible, a modest fortune. Would they win? With God’s help, could they? And was true adventure to be thrown in for good measure? The girl thrilled at the thought, for, ambitious as she undoubtedly was, she was human as well, and who does not feel his blood race at thought of adventure?

However, at this moment something other than adventure called, the cry of a

child in the night. Florence dearly loved small children. She could not bear to have them suffer.

“I—I’ve just got to get out and hunt her up,” she murmured.

With a shudder she dragged her feet from the warmth of the blankets, slipped on knickers and shoes, then crept out into the cheerless night.

She did not have far to go. Huddled in a corner, out of the wind, she discovered two blanket-wrapped figures. Girls they were, one small, one large. Indians, she saw as she threw her light upon their dark faces.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, striving to keep her teeth from chattering.

“Dog bite her,” the older girl spoke in a slow, deep tone. “White man dog. Strange white man dog. Come steamboat this day.”

“Yes,” Florence moved closer. “We all came by steamboat. There are many dogs. Too many! Let me see.”

The small child thrust a trembling hand from a greasy blanket.

“Ah!” Florence breathed. “That’s rather bad. Not very deep, but dog bites are bad. It must be dressed. I’ll be back.”

Stepping quickly to the tent she poured warm water from a thermos bottle into a basin, snatched up a first-aid kit, then hurried back.

“Here you are,” she said cheerily. “First we wash it. Then we dry it. Then—this will hurt a little, quite a bit, I guess.” She produced a bottle of iodine. “You tell her. Tell her it will hurt.” She spoke to the older girl, who said some words in her own language to the attentive child. When she had finished, Florence received her first reward—nor was it to be the last—for this bit of personal sacrifice, the child fixed upon her a look that registered perfect faith and confidence.

Florence applied the severe remedy. Then she watched the child’s face. A single tear crept from the corner of her eye and ran down her cheek.

It hurt, that iodine, hurt terribly for the moment. Florence knew that. Yet not a muscle of the child’s face moved.

“This,” Florence thought, with a little tightening at the throat, “is the spirit of the North. It is with this spirit that we all must face the trials and dangers that lie before us in this world. If we do this, we shall be real pioneers and we shall win.

“We shall win!” she whispered hoarsely, as standing erect, hands clenched tight, she stood for a moment facing the bitter Arctic gale.

“Feel better now?” she asked, dropping again to the child’s side.

The child nodded.

“All right. Now we’ll bind it up tight and it will be fine.”

Five minutes later Florence saw the child’s head fall against her older sister’s side. Her pain gone, her cry stilled, she had fallen asleep. That was Florence’s second reward, but not her last.

As she once more crept beneath the warm covers in her tent, she felt the slender arms of Mary, her cousin, close about her and heard her murmur with a shudder: “It is so far and so cold!”

“She’s talking in her sleep again,” Florence told herself. Then, out of sympathy for the frailer girl, she too shuddered.

Yes, it had been a long way and even though it was early June, it was cold. Yet Florence thrilled at thought of it all. That journey, how it had unfolded, first on paper, second in their minds, then in reality!

Mark and Mary had lived with their mother in the Copper Country of Michigan. Because she had few relatives and was in need of a home, Florence had joined them there.

No copper was being mined, so there was no work and, struggle as they might, they had grown poorer and poorer.

Then had come word of what appeared to them a wonderful opportunity. The government was to send two hundred or more families to the rich Matamuska Valley in Alaska. They were to be given land and to be loaned money that they might make a fresh start.

“Pioneers! They will be pioneers in a new land!” Florence, who was of true pioneer stock, young, sturdy and strong, had exclaimed. “Why should we not go?”

Why, indeed? They had applied, had been accepted, and here they were at the seaport of the railroad that was to bear them on to their new world.

“Tomorrow,” she whispered softly to herself. “Tomorrow, to—” At that she fell fast asleep.

If the scene of confusion on the dock at Anchorage with the trucks, tractors, tents, and groceries had seemed strange, the picture before Florence, Mary and Mark a few days later might, to a casual observer, have seemed even more strange. Palmer, dream city of the future, lay before them. And such a city! A city of tents. Yet, city of tents as it was, it did not lack signs of excitement. This was the great day. On this day the future home owners of this rich valley, surrounded by its snow-capped mountains, were to draw lots for their tracts of land. Some tracts were close to Palmer, some ten or twelve miles away. A few settlers there were who wished for solitude in the far-off spots. Many hoped for tracts close in, where they might walk into town for their mail and to join in the latest gossip. Florence, Mary, and Mark had sensed the bleak loneliness of distant farms during the long winter. They too hoped for a spot close at hand.

“Now,” Florence whispered as, after a long time of waiting in line, Mark approached the drawing stand. “Now it is your turn!”

Mark’s hand trembled as it went out. Florence felt her heart pause, then go leaping. It meant so much, so very much, that tiny square of paper with a number on it.

Turning away from the curious throng, Mark cupped his hand, then together they all three peered at that magic number.

“One hundred and twelve!” Florence whispered tensely. “Here—here is our map. Where is our farm? Here! Here! Let’s look!”

One moment of hurried search, then a sigh of disappointment. “Seven miles from town.” Mary dropped limply down upon a stump.

“Might have been twelve,” Mark said cheerfully. “Bet there’s a bear or a moose right in the middle of it waiting to be made into hamburger. But then,” he sighed, “we couldn’t kill him. Can’t get a hunting license for a year.”

Two hours later Mark and Mary with their mother and Florence close at hand were listening to a tempting offer. Ramsey McGregor, a huge man from the western plains, had drawn a tract of land only a half mile from town. He had no cow. The Hughes family owned a cow, a very good milker. If they would trade tracts of land and throw in the cow, they might have his farm close to town.

“Think of it!” Mark cried. “Right in town, you might say!”

“Y-e-s,” Florence agreed. “But then—” Already she had seen quite enough of the noisy, quarrelsome camp. And besides, there was the cow. Precious possession, old Boss. Cows were dear—milk was hardly to be had at any price. “And yet—” she sighed. Long tramps through the deep snow, with a wild Arctic blizzard beating her back, seemed to haunt her. “You’ll have to decide,” she said slowly. “It’s to be your home. I—I’m only a helper.”

Into this crisis there stepped an angel in disguise, an unimportant appearing, dark-faced angel, the older of the two Indian girls Florence had seen and aided back there at the dock in Anchorage. Now the girl, approaching timidly, drew Florence’s head down to the level of her own and whispered, “Don’t trade!”

“Why?” Florence whispered back.

“Don’t trade,” the Indian girl repeated. “Bye and bye I show you.” She was gone.

“What did she say?” Mark asked. Mark was slow, steady, thoughtful, dependable. Florence had no relative she liked so much.

“She says not to trade.” There was a look of uncertainty on the big girl’s face.

“Greasy little Indian girl,” Ramsey McGregor growled. “What does she know?”

“Might know a lot,” Mark wrinkled his brow. “What do you say?” he turned to the others. “No trade?”

“No trade, I’d say,” was Florence’s quick response.

“Al—alright. No trade.” Mary swallowed hard. She had wanted to be near town.

“Whatever you children want,” agreed the meek little mother. Life had pushed her about so long she was quite willing to take the strong arm of her son and to say, “You lead the way.”

“It’s a lot like playing a hunch,” Mark laughed uncertainly. “After all, the claim we got is the claim we drew. Looks like God intended it that way. Besides there’s old Boss. We couldn’t—”

“No, we couldn’t do without her,” Mary exclaimed. And so the matter was settled. Somewhere out there where the sun set would be their home.

Two hours later Florence and Mary were enjoying a strange ride. From some unsuspected source, the Indian girl had secured five shaggy dogs. These were hitched, not to a sled, for there was no snow, but to a narrow three-wheeled cart equipped with auto wheels. Whence had come those auto wheels? Florence did not ask, enough that they eased their way over the bumps along the narrow, uneven trail that might, in time, become a road.

The land they were passing over fascinated Mary, who had an eye for the beautiful. Now they passed through groves of sweet-scented, low-growing fir and spruce, now watched the pale green and white of quaking asp, and now went rolling over a low, level, treeless stretch where the early grass turned all to a luscious green, and white flowers stood out like stars.

The surprise of their journey came when, after passing through a wide stretch of timber, they arrived quite suddenly upon an open space.

“A clearing! A cabin! A lake!” Mary exclaimed. “How beautiful!”

It was indeed beautiful. True, the clearing showed signs of neglect, young trees had sprouted where a field had been, the door of the cabin, standing ajar, seemed to say, “Nobody’s home. Nobody’s been home for many a day.” For all that, the gray cabin, built of great, seasoned logs, the clearing sloping down to a small, deep lake, where a flock of wild ducks swam all unafraid, made a picture one would not soon forget.

“Come,” said the Indian girl. A moment later they stepped in awed silence across the threshold of the cabin.

The large room they entered was almost bare. A rustic table, two home-made chairs, a great sheet-iron barrel, fashioned into a stove, a few dishes in the corner, a rusted frying pan and a kettle, that was about all. Yet, strangely enough, as Florence tiptoed across the threshold she found herself listening for the slow tick-tock, tick-tock, of an old-fashioned clock. With all its desolation there was somehow about the place an air of “home.”

“Oh!” Mary breathed deeply. Then again, “Oh!”

A stout ladder led to a tall loft where a bed might, for all they could tell, be waiting. At the back was a door opening into the small kitchen.

“Home,” Florence breathed again.

“Home,” Mary echoed.

Then together they tiptoed out into the sunlight.

Quite unexpectedly, the Indian girl spoke. “This,” she said, spreading her arms wide to take in the cabin, the clearing and the lake beyond, “this is it.”

“Thi—this is what?” Mary stammered.

“This,” replied the girl, “is your land.”

“No!” Florence exclaimed. “It can’t be.”

“But yes, it is your farm.” The girl smiled a happy smile. “This is the number you drew.”

“Ours!” Florence whispered hoarsely. “An abandoned cabin, a clearing, a lake! All ours! And to think, we nearly missed it!” Then, quite wild with joy, she surprised the shy Indian girl by catching her up in her arms and kissing her on the cheek.

At that very moment, as if it were part of some strange drama, there sounded from the edge of the clearing a loud: “Get up! Go ’long there!” and a traveling rig as strange as their own burst from the edge of the timber.

A moment later, a little man on a high-wheeled, wobbly cart, shouted, “Whoa,

January!” to his shaggy horse, then sat for a full moment staring at the three girls.

“You’re some of them new settlers?” he said at last.

Florence nodded. She was too much surprised to do more. The man, whose whiskers had grown for months all untrimmed and whose hair fell to his shoulders, looked as if he might have stepped from an illustration of Rip Van Winkle.

“This your place?” he asked. Again the girl nodded.

“Well,” his eyes swept the horizon, “you’re lucky maybe—and then again maybe not. There’s the clearin’ an’ the cabin, but maybe the cabin’s haunted.

“No—no, not by ghosts!” he held up a hand. “By people who once lived here. It’s a notion of mine, this business of houses being haunted by living folks.

“But then,” his voice dropped. “Mebby they’re dead. Some sort of foreigners they was, the ones that lived in this cabin. Came here durin’ the war. Lot of queer ones in the valley them days. Deserters, some of ’em. Some dodgin’ the draft. Some foreign spies.

“Big man, that one,” he nodded toward the cabin. “Big woman. Hard workers. Not much to say for themselves.

“One day they’d gone. Where? Why? No one knows. Spies, maybe. Government boat at Anchorage just at that time. Shot ’em, like as not, for spies.”

Florence shuddered.

“Maybe not,” the man went on. “Might come back—Chicaski was the name. Russians.”

“If—if they come back, can they claim the cabin?” Florence was thrown into sudden consternation.

“No-o. I guess not. Didn’t have no legal claim on it like as not. There’s other deserted cabins in the valley, lots of ’em. Folks got discouraged and quit. Raise plenty of things to eat. Can’t sell a thing. No market. Trap fox and mink, that’s

all you can sell. Folks want things that don’t grow on land.

“Got to git along,” he exclaimed, clucking to his horse. “Live back there five miles, I do. I’ll be seein’ you.

“Git up! Go ’long there!” The strange little man gave his shaggy horse a light tap with the rein and the odd outfit went rattling away.

“Peter Piper,” said the Indian girl, nodding after the man.

“You mean that’s his name?” Florence asked in surprise.

The girl nodded.

“Oh!” Mary exclaimed. “And did he pick a peck of prickly pears?”

The Indian girl stared at her until they all burst into fits of laughter.

For all that, it was a sober Florence who journeyed back to Palmer. Strange words were passing through her mind. “Maybe it’s haunted. Raise anything. Can’t sell anything. No market—you want things that don’t grow on the ground.” Her world seemed to have taken on a whirling motion that, like clouds blown by the wind, showed first a bright, then a darker side. What was to come of it all?

“A ticket to adventure,” she thought at last. “Perhaps that man was more right than he knew.”

CHAPTER III
SEVEN GOLDEN CANDLESTICKS

Three days later Florence found herself seated on the shore of the little lake that lay at the edge of their claim. She was alone. “How still it is,” she whispered. Not a leaf moved. The dark surface of the lake lay before her like black glass.

“The land of great silence,” she thought. She shuddered and knew not why.

This was to her a strange world. All her life she had known excitement. The rattle of elevated trains, the honk of auto horns, the drum of airplane motors, all these seemed still to sound in her ears.

“Rivers,” she whispered thoughtfully, “have eddies. There the water that has been rushing madly on comes to rest. Do lives have eddies? Has my life moved into an eddy?”

She did not enjoy the thought. Adventure, thrills, suspense, mystery, these were her favorite words. How could one find them here? And yet, there was the cabin that lay just up the rise. Their cabin now, it had belonged to others. Russians probably, spies perhaps.

“What if they come back?” Mary had whispered during their return journey from that first visit. “What if they demand the cabin?”

“We’ll throw them out,” Florence had said, making a savage gesture. “I wonder if we would?” had been Mary’s reply. Florence wondered about that now. She wondered about many things. Why had she come to this place at all? Because of her love for the little family, her relatives, Mary, Mark, and their mother. Could love make people do things? She wondered. Could it make them do slow, hard, drudging, everyday things? If it could, how long would that last?

The thoughts that came to her there were neither sad nor bitter. They were such

dreamy thoughts as come after a long day of toil. They had worked, all of them; oh! how they had worked getting settled!

“I—I’d like to go back, back to the city to the wild romance of many people!” she cried to the empty air of night.

Then, of a sudden, she realized that she did not wish to go back, but rather to go on, on, on, on into the North. For, as she sat there she seemed to see again the little man, Mr. Il-ay-ok, and to hear him say, “Tom Kennedy, yes, I know him,” and Tom Kennedy was her long-lost grandfather.

“Yes,” she exclaimed, “and I shall go!” Springing to her feet, she spread her arms wide. Seeking out the north star, she faced the land over which it hung. “Yes, Tom Kennedy, my grandfather, I am coming.

“But not now—not now,” she murmured. “One thing at a time. I have given my word. I am to help these others win a home. Adventure, thrills, mystery, romance,” she repeated slowly, “can they be here?”

Then as if in answer to her query, there came a faint sound. It grew louder, came closer, the night call of wild geese.

“How—how perfect!” she breathed. “The lake, the damp night air, the silence, then a call from the sky.”

She waited. She listened. The speeding flock came closer. At last they were circling. They would land. She caught the rush of wings directly over her head, then heard the faintest of splashes.

“Happy landing!”

But not for long. She was creeping silently away. They were pioneers. Pioneers lived off the land. Here was promise of roast goose for tomorrow dinner. Too bad to spoil romance, but life must go on.

Slipping up to the cabin, she took Mark’s gun from its place beside the door. With her heart beating a tattoo against her ribs, she crept back.

Closer and closer she crept until at last she lay, quite still, among the tall grass that skirted the pond.

“Where are they?” she whispered to herself. No answer, save the distant flapping of wings. How was one to shoot a wild goose he could not see?

“Ah, well,” she thought. “I can wait. There will be a moon.”

Wait she did. Once again the strangely silent night, like some great, friendly ghost, seemed to enfold her in its arms. Far away loomed the mountains, close at hand spread the plains, and over all silence. Only now and again this silence was broken by the flapping of wings, a sudden challenging scream, the call that told her a rich dinner still awaited her.

At last the moon crept over the white crested mountains. It turned the lake into a sheet of silver. Dark spots moved across that sheet. They came closer and closer. Thirty yards they were from shore, now twenty yards, and now ten yards. The girl caught one long sighing breath. Then, bang! Bang! Both barrels spoke.

A moment later, waist deep, the girl waded for the shore. In each hand she carried a dead bird, two big, fat geese. Tomorrow there would be a feast. Romance? Adventure? Well, perhaps, a little. But much more was to come. She felt sure of that now. Her heart leaped as she hurried forward to meet Mark and Mary, who were racing toward her demanding what all the shooting was about.

“A feast!” Mary cried joyously. “A real pioneer feast. Thanksgiving in June! The Pilgrim Fathers have nothing on us.”

Such a feast as it was! Roast wild goose with dressing, great brown baked potatoes, slashed and filled with sweet home-made butter, all this topped with cottage pudding smothered in maple sauce.

“Who says pioneering is a hard life?” Mark drawled when the meal was over.

“It couldn’t be with such a glorious cook,” Florence smiled at her aunt.

When, at last, she crept up to her bed in the loft that night, she was conscious of an unusual stiffness in her joints. Little wonder this, for all day long she had wielded a grubbing hoe, tearing out the roots of stubborn young trees. They were preparing their land for the plow. They would raise a crop if no one else among the new settlers did. What crops? That had not been fully decided.

As Florence lay staring at the shadowy rafters she fell to musing about what life

might be like if one remained in this valley year after year. “A farm of your own,” she thought, “cows, chickens, pigs, a husband, children.” Laughing softly, she turned on her side and fell asleep.

Five days later their first real visitor arrived. She was Mrs. Swenson, a short, plump farm mother and old-time settler of the valley. She had lived here for fifteen years.

Florence, who was churning while Mary and her mother were away in the town, gave her an enthusiastic welcome. The handle of the old-fashioned dasher churn went swish-swash.

“Just keep right on churnin’,” Mrs. Swenson insisted. “You don’t dare stop or the butter won’t come.

“It’s the strangest thing!” her eyes roved about the large room. “The Chicaskis—that was the name of the people who built this cabin—they disappeared, you might say, overnight.”

“Oh! Did you know them?” the swish-swash stopped for a space of seconds.

“Well, yes and no,” Mrs. Swenson smiled an odd smile. “No one got to know them very well. They left on foot,” she leaned forward in her chair. “They’d had a horse. They sold that to Tim Huston. So away they went, each of them with satchels in both hands. That’s all they took. It’s the strangest thing.”

She paused. The churn went swish-swash. The little tin clock in the corner went tick-tick-tick. Florence’s lips parted.

Then her visitor spoke again: “They had other things. Wonderful things. A huge copper kettle and,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “seven golden candlesticks. Leastwise, I always thought they was gold. She always had ’em up there above the fireplace, and how they did shine! Gold! I’m sure of it.

“They might have took them. Maybe they did, the candlesticks, I mean. But that huge copper kettle. They never took that, not in a satchel.

“I don’t mind admitting,” Mrs. Swenson’s tone became confidential, “that those of us who’ve lived around here ever since have done a lot of snoopin’ about this old place, lookin’ for that copper kettle and—and other things.

“There are those who say they hid gold, lots of Russian, or maybe German gold, around here somewhere. But, of course, you can’t believe all you hear. And no one has ever found anything, not even the big copper kettle. So,” she settled back in her chair, “perhaps there’s nothing to it after all. Mighty nice cabin, though,” her tone changed. “Make you a snug home in winter. Not like these cabins the other settlers are building out of green logs. Them logs are goin’ to warp something terrible when they dry. Then,” she threw back her head and laughed, “then the children will be crawlin’ through the cracks, and with the temperature at thirty below—think what that will be like!”

Florence did think. She shuddered at the very mention of it, and whispered a silent prayer of thanksgiving to the good God who had guided them to their snug cabin at the edge of the clearing beside that gem of a lake.

At thought of it all, she gave herself an imaginary hug. From without came the steady pop-pop-pop of a gasoline motor. Mark was driving a small tractor, plowing their clearing. They were to have a crop this first year, for it was still June. Few settlers would have crops. They were lucky.

She looked at her torn and blistered hand, then heaved a sigh of content. Those small trees had been stubborn, some had been thorny. It had been a heartbreaking job, but now all that was over. The tractor chugging merrily outside was music to her weary soul.

The tractor? That, too, had been a streak of luck. Or was it luck? Mark had always loved fine machinery. Because of this he had made it his business for years to learn all about trucks, tractors, mine hoists, motor-boats, and all else that came within his narrow horizon. When he had asked down at Palmer about the use of a tractor the man in charge had said: “Over yonder they are. Not assembled yet. Put one up and you can use it.”

“Sure. I’ll do that,” Mark grinned. And he did.

Then they had wanted him to stay and set up others. He had turned his back on this promising position with good pay. He had come to this land to make a home for his family, and he was determined not to turn back. So here was the clearing, ten acres nearly plowed. A short task the harrowing would be. And then what should they plant?

“I’ll ask Mrs. Swenson about that after a while,” Florence promised herself. Mrs.

Swenson had come a long way and was to stay for dinner. Florence had raised biscuits and a large salmon baking in the oven of the stove they had brought up from Palmer. They were to have one more royal feast. Three other guests were to arrive soon.

She smiled as she opened the oven door, releasing a wave of heat and delightful odors of cooking things.

“Mr. McQueen’s an old dear,” she thought. “He’ll be the godfather of our little settlement. I’m sure of that.”

Yes, the newly arrived settler whose land joined theirs at the back was an interesting old man. Gray haired and sixty, he stood straight as a ramrod, six feet four in his stockings. Strong, brave, wise with the wisdom that comes only with years, he would indeed prove a grand counsellor.

And there was Dave, his son, just turned twenty. “Slow, silent, steady going, hard working, dependable,” had been Florence’s instant snap-shot of his character; nor was she likely to be wrong.

Then, there was Bill Vale, whose land joined them on the west. How different was Bill! A dreamer, at twenty-two he was more a boy, less a man, than Dave. And Bill’s mother, who adored him, agreed with him in every detail. The girl’s brow wrinkled as she thought of Bill and his mother. How were such people to get on in a hard, new land? But then, what was the good of shouldering the problems of others? They had problems of their own. What were they to plant? That was their immediate problem and a large one.

The meal was over and they were all seated before the broad, screened door, looking away at the lake, blue as the sky, when Florence asked a question:

“Mrs. Swenson, what shall we plant?”

Mrs. Swenson did not reply at once. The dinner they had eaten was a rich and jolly one, just such a dinner as Florence could prepare. The day was warm. Mrs. Swenson was fat and chubby. Perhaps she had all but fallen asleep.

“Mrs. Swenson,” Florence repeated, louder this time, “what shall we plant?”

“What’s that?” the good lady started. “Plant? Why, almost anything. Peas, beans, carrots, beets, some oats and barley for your cow. May not get ripe, but you cut it for fodder. Soy beans are good, too. And potatoes! You should have seen our potatoes last year, four hundred bushels on an acre!”

“Four hundred on an acre!” Florence stared. “That would be four thousand on our ten acres if we planted it all to potatoes. Four thousand at how much a bushel, Mrs. Swenson?”

“Why, dear, at nothing at all!” Mrs. Swenson exclaimed. “You can’t sell ’em. We haven’t a market. A few go to Fairbanks. Those are all sold long ago.”

No market. There it was again. Florence’s heart sank.

“Potatoes and tomatoes,” Mark gave a sudden start. His face lighted as the earth lights when the sun slips from behind a cloud.

“No,” said Mrs. Swenson, quite emphatically. “Not tomatoes. You’ll get huge vines and blossoms, beautiful blossoms, that’s all.”

“Tomatoes,” Mark repeated with a slow, dreamy smile. “Bushels and bushels of tomatoes.”

Mrs. Swenson stared at him in hurt surprise. “No tomatoes,” she said again.

Florence favored Mark with a sidewise glance. She had seen that look on his face before two or three times and always something had come of it, something worth while. Like a song at sunrise, it warmed her heart.

Then, quite suddenly, the subject was changed. “I don’t see what’s the good of a market. Not just now,” Bill Vale drawled. “The government’s willing to provide us everything we need to eat or wear, and a lot of things besides. Mother and I are getting a gasoline motor to run the washing machine and a buzz-saw. No freezing at twenty below sawing wood for me.”

“Nor me,” laughed Dave McQueen. “I aim to work too fast on our old cross-cut saw to have time to freeze.”

“Fact is, Bill,” Mark put in, “in the end we’ve got to pay for all these things.”

“Yes,” Bill laughed lightly. “Got thirty years to pay, start in five years.”

“Well,” the older McQueen drawled. “Five years have rolled round a dozen times in my lifetime. They all seemed strangely short. And when the payments start, they’ll be coming round with ominous regularity. Mark and Florence here have the right idea—keep debts down and get proceeds rolling in at the earliest possible moment.”

“Tomatoes,” Mark said dreamily. “Bushels and bush—”

At that they all started to their feet. From somewhere just out of their view had come the loud heehaw, heehaw of a donkey.

“What?” Florence sprang out the door. Then her lips parted in a smile, for there before her stood one more odd character from this strange new world: the oddest, she thought, of them all.

Tall, slim, white-haired, an old man sat astride a burro. And behind him came two other burros heavily laden with packs. From one pack protruded the handles of a pick and a shovel.

“A forty-niner,” Florence thought.

“A real old sourdough Alaskan prospector!” Bill exclaimed, wild with enthusiasm.

“Whoa! Hello!” the old man shouted in one breath. “People livin’ here! That’s bad for me. I’ve been camping here as I came and went for a long spell.”

“The latch-string is still on the outside,” Florence laughed a welcome. “We’ve got hot raised biscuits,” she encouraged. “Hot raised biscuits, sweet, home-churned butter and plenty of coffee.”

“Hot raised biscuits.” The man passed a hand before his eyes. “And sweet butter. Haven’t heard those words in twenty years. Came to Alaska during the rush in ’97. Just out of college then. Been prospecting for gold ever since. Found it twice. It’s all gone now. But there’s gold in them hills.” His face lighted as he looked away at the snowy peaks. “Gold,” he repeated softly. “Sure,” his voice changed, the light in his eyes faded. “Sure. Hot biscuits and sweet butter. Sure, I’ll stop and rest awhile.”

“Well, folks,” Mark stood looking away at his partly plowed field. “I’ve got to get back to work. Season’s short. Must get in our seed.”

“Bill,” he slapped the tall boy on the back, “you’ve got an acre or two that’s nearly clear. You get busy and root out the brush. Then I’ll plow it for you.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Bill scarcely heard. His eyes were on the prospector’s pack.

“How about offering the same to us?” Dave asked.

“Sure,” Mark exclaimed. “But you got a hard forty to clear, all timber, looks like.”

“We’ve picked a spot,” Dave drawled. “We’ve got strong backs and weak minds, Dad and I have,” he laughed a roaring laugh. “We’ll have a garden spot ready in two days. You’ll see.”

Florence flashed Dave an approving smile.

“Mr. McQueen,” she said quietly, turning to Dave’s father, “we’re having some of the folks in for a sing Sunday afternoon. Mary will play our reed organ, you know. Per—perhaps you’d like to say a few words to the folks.”

“Why, yes, I—” the old man hesitated. “I—I’m no orator, but I might say a word or two. Good, old-fashioned time we’ll have.”

“Sure will!” Mark agreed.

While the others returned to their work, Bill lingered behind to talk with the prospector. After laying out a generous supply of food, Florence retired to the kitchen and the dinner dishes. Through the door there drifted scraps of Bill’s talk with the old man.

“Ever really find gold?”... “Lots of times.”... “Boy! That must have been great! I’m getting me a pick and shovel right now.”... “Take your time about that, son,” the old man counselled. “But there’s gold. Plenty of it. I’ll find it this time. Sure to.” His voice rose.

“Any bears up there?” Bill asked.

“Plenty of ’em. But I don’t bother ’em and they don’t bother me.”

“I’d bother them,” Bill cried.

“Yes,” Florence thought. “Bill would bother them.” She remembered the high-powered rifle that decorated Bill’s tent.

“Temptation,” she thought, “does not belong to great cities alone. Here boys are tempted to go after big game, to search for gold, to chase rainbows.” Already Bill’s young brain was on fire.

To her consternation, she suddenly realized that her blood too was racing. Had she caught the gleam of gold on the horizon? Would she listen to the call of wild adventure until it led her away into those snow-capped mountains?

“No,” she whispered fiercely. She had come to this valley to help those she loved, Mary, Mark, and their mother, to assist them in securing for themselves a home. She would cling to that purpose. She *would*! She stamped her foot so hard the dishes rattled and Bill in the other room gave a sudden start.

“Probably thought I was a bear,” she laughed low.

Then a thought struck her with the force of a blow. “He said he’d been in Alaska since ’97. That old man said that,” she whispered. “Perhaps—” She sprang to the door.

“Mister—er,” she hesitated.

“Name’s Dale—Malcomb Dale,” the old man rose and bowed.

“Oh, Mr. Dale,” Florence caught her breath. “You said you had been in Alaska a long time. Did you ever know a man named Tom Kennedy?”

“Tom Kennedy! Sure! A fine man, but like the rest of us.” He smiled oddly. “A little touched in the head, you might say, always looking for gold.”

“And did—did he ever find it?”

“Yes, once, I’m told. Let’s see. That was, well, never mind what year. They found gold, he and his partner, found it way back of the beyond, you might say,

and—”

“And—” Florence prompted.

“And they lost it.”

“Lost—lost it?” Florence stared.

“His partner, Dan Nolan, became ill. Tom Kennedy dragged him all the way to Nome on a small sled. No dogs. Stormed all that time. No trail, nothing. Got lost, nearly froze, but he came through. Powerful man, Tom Kennedy. Good man, too, best ever. True a man as ever lived.”

“Oh, I—I’m glad.” Unbidden the words slipped out.

The prospector stared at her. “I said they lost the mine, never found it again. Nolan died.”

“And Tom Kennedy, he—”

“He’s alive, far as I know. He’s always hunting that mine. Never found it yet. But then,” the old man sighed, “there’s plenty of us like that up here where the sun forgets to set in summer. Gets in your blood.

“Well,” he put out a hand, “I’ll get my burros started. I—I’ll be goin’,” his voice was rich and mellow with years. “I shall not forget you. And when I strike it rich —” he hesitated, then smiled a smile that was like the sunset, “I’ll trade you gold and diamonds for raised biscuits and sweet butter.” He stared for a moment, as if seeing a vision of the past, then bowed himself out. He was gone. Bill went with him. How far he would go the girl could only guess.

Left alone with her thoughts, Florence found herself wondering about many things. Was there truly no market for the things they raised? As the months and years rolled on, would there still be no market? Fairbanks, a small city to the north of them, was in need of many kinds of food. Could they not supply some of these needs?

Then, of a sudden, she recalled Mark’s words, “Tomatoes. Bushels and bushels of tomatoes.” Why had he insisted, why repeated this word, even after Mrs. Swenson had said, “no tomatoes”? Mark had something in mind. What was it?

She could not guess, but dared hope.

She recalled Mrs. Swenson's words about the mysterious pair that had, with so much labor, erected this cabin, cleared this land, then left it all. "I wonder why they left?"

Then, "Seven golden candlesticks," she murmured, "and a great copper kettle. We could use that kettle." After that, in spite of her desire to be practical, she found herself searching the place from foundation to the loft. All she found was an ancient Dutch oven, rusted beyond reclaiming.

"All the same," she thought, "it *is* strange what became of that copper kettle and —" She did not allow the thought to finish itself. She had been about to think "gold." She knew that in this land one must not dream—at least, not too much.

CHAPTER IV
THE GREAT STUMP

There was one thing about their little farm that, from the first time she saw it, had seemed strange to Florence. Back of the house stood the stump of a forest giant. Fully three feet across it stood there, roots embedded deep, while all about it were pigmies of the tree world. There was not a tree on the farm that measured more than thirty feet tall. Why? Perhaps a fire had destroyed the primeval forest. Yet here was this great stump.

She tried to picture the tree towering above its fellows. She found herself wishing that it had not been felled by some woodsman's axe. Why had they cut it down? That they might build its logs into the house was a natural answer, yet the house contained no such logs. Well, here was a riddle.

On top of the stump the original dwellers in the cabin had placed a massive flower-box. Somehow, they had secured wild morning-glory seeds and planted them there. These must, from year to year, have replanted themselves, for, even in June, the vines were beginning to droop over the edge of the box. By autumn the great stump would be a mass of flowers. However others might regard wild morning-glories, Florence knew she would adore them.

She was standing staring at the stump and thinking of it with renewed wonder when Mark came in from his plowing.

"There! That's done," he exclaimed as he dropped down upon a bench. "Now for the planting." Then, to his cousin's renewed astonishment, he said. "Bushels and bushels of tomatoes."

"Mark!" exclaimed Florence. "Why do you keep on insisting that we can raise tomatoes here when Mrs. Swenson, who has lived here so long, says we can't?"

“Because we can,” Mark grinned broadly.

“How?”

“Sit down and stop staring at that stump as if it hid some strange secret and I’ll tell you.”

Florence sat down.

“You know the way I have of poking about in all sorts of odd corners wherever I am,” Mark began. “Well, while we were in Anchorage I got to prowling round and stumbled upon a small greenhouse set way back on a side street where very few people would see it.

“Well, you know you’ll always find something interesting in a greenhouse. Some new vegetable or flower, a strange form of moss or fungus, or even a new species of plant pest. So I went in.”

“And you—”

“I found tomato plants all in blossom, dozens and dozens of them in pots.”

“But why—”

“That’s what I asked the man—why? He said he’d raised them for some gardener in a town down south, half way to Seattle. Something had gone wrong with the man or his garden. He couldn’t use them so—”

“There they were.”

“Yes,” Mark agreed with uncommon enthusiasm. “There they were, and there, I am quite sure, they are still. They can be bought cheap, probably four hundred plants in pots. Must be tomatoes big as marbles on them by now.”

“And you know,” he went on excitedly, “when you set out potted plants the blossoms and small tomatoes do not drop off, they just keep on growing. And here, where the sun will be shining almost twenty-four hours a day, they should just boom along. Have ripe tomatoes in six weeks. Then how those well-to-do people in Anchorage, Seward and Fairbanks will go after them! Tomatoes!” he exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “Bushels and bushels of tomatoes; ripe, red

gold!”

“But if there is a frost?”

“Yes,” Mark said with a drop in his voice. “A June frost. That happens sometimes. It’s a chance we’ll have to take. I’m going to Anchorage for those plants tomorrow.

“You know,” his voice dropped, “I can’t see all this going in debt for the things you eat and wear, to say nothing of tools, machinery, and all that. It’s got to be paid sometime and it’s going to come hard.

“It’s all right if you have to do it, better than getting no start at all. I’m not criticising anyone else. But, as for the Hughes family, we’re going to pay as we go if we can, and who knows but those tomatoes will pay for our winter’s supply of flour, sugar, and all the rest?”

“Who knows?” Florence echoed enthusiastically.

Six weeks had passed when once again Florence sat beside the lake. There was a moon tonight. It hung like a magic lantern above the snow-capped mountain. The lake reflected both mountains and moon so perfectly that for one who looked too long, it became not a lake at all, but mountains and moon.

Florence had looked too long. She was dreaming of wandering among those jagged peaks in an exciting search. A search for gold. And why not? Had not the aged prospector appeared once more at their door? Had she not feasted him on hot-cakes and wild honey? Had he not repaid her with fresh tales of her grandfather’s doings in the very far north?

“I shall go in search of him,” she told herself now. “A search for a grandfather,” she laughed. Well, why not? He had lost a rich gold mine. She was strong as a man, was Florence. No man, she was sure, could follow a dog team farther nor faster than she. She would find Tom Kennedy and together they would find that mine.

“But first this!” she sighed as on other occasions, flinging her arms wide to take in the claim, the lake, and the cabin.

“First what?” a voice close at hand said.

Startled, she sprang to her feet. “Oh! It’s you, Mark.” She made a place for him beside her on a broad flat rock.

“First your little farm,” she said soberly. “Tomatoes and potatoes and all the rest. A shelter for old Boss, everything that will go to make this a home for you and Mary and your mother.”

“And you,” Mark’s voice was low.

“No. Not for me, Mark. For you this is life. I understand that. I admire you for it. To have a home, and a small farm, to add to that year after year, to change the log cabin for a fine home, to have cattle and sheep and broad pasture and—” she hesitated, then went on, “and children, boys and girls, happy in their home. All this is your life and will be years on end. But for me, it is only—what should I say—an episode, one adventure among many, a grand and glorious experience.”

“Yes,” Mark said, and there was kindness in his voice. “Yes, I suppose that is it. Awfully good of you to share the hardest year with us.”

“What do you mean hardest?” Florence demanded. “It’s been glorious. And we are succeeding so well. Already the tomatoes are up to my shoulders. What a crop they will be!”

“Yes,” Mark’s voice was husky. “We’ve been lucky.”

For a time there was silence. Then Mark spoke again. “There was a time, and not so long ago, when I thought to myself, ‘Life’s stream must grow darker and deeper as we go along.’ But now—well—” he did not finish.

“Now,” Florence laughed from sheer joy of living. “Now you must know that it grows lighter and brighter.”

“Lighter and brighter,” Mark laughed softly. “Those are fine words, mighty fine.”

“They’re grand words,” the girl cried. “True words, too. It—why, life is like a summer morning! Only day before yesterday I went out to find old Boss before dawn. It was more than half dark. Clouds along the horizon were all black. They looked ominous, threatening. Soon, some power behind them began to set them on fire. Redder and redder they shone, then they began to fade. Salmon colored,

deep pink, pale pink, they faded and faded until like a ghost's winding sheet they vanished. Lighter and brighter. Oh, Mark! how grand and beautiful life can be!" Leaping to her feet she did a wild dance, learned in some gypsy camp with her good friend, Petite Jeanne; then, dropping to her place beside the boy, she looked away into the night. For her, darkness held no terror, for well she knew there should be a brighter dawn.

Of a sudden, as they sat there, each busy with thoughts of days that were to come, they were startled by a sudden loud splash.

"Oh!" Florence jumped.

"Only some big old land-locked salmon," Mark chuckled.

"I didn't know—"

"That they were here? Oh, sure! I've heard them before."

"Mark, I love to fish. Couldn't we fix up something?"

"Sure. There's a line or two in the cabin and some three gang hooks. I'll cut the handle off a silver-plated spoon. It'll spin all right without the handle. That'll fool 'em. You'll see!"

She did see. The very next day she saw what Mark's inventive skill would do and, seeing, she found fresh adventure that might have ended badly had not some good angel guided one young man to an unusually happy landing.

CHAPTER V
HAPPY LANDING

Dull gray as a slate roof, the lake lay before Florence next morning. There was a threat of rain. From time to time, like scurrying wild things, little ripples ran across the water.

“Just the time for a try at that big old salmon trout,” she exulted.

They had a boat, of a sort. A great hollow log brought down from the hills, with its ends boarded up. It leaked, and it steered like a balky mule, but what of that? She would have a try at trolling.

Dropping on her knees at the back of the boat, she seized the paddle, then went gliding out across the gray, rippling water. Quite deftly she dropped in her silver spoon and played out her line.

After that, for a full quarter hour, she paddled about in ever-widening circles. Once her heart skipped a beat. A strike! No, only a weed. She had come too near the shore. Casting the weed contemptuously away, she struck out for deeper water.

Round and round she circled. Darker grew the surface of the lake. Going to rain, all right. Clouds were closing in, dropping lower and lower. Well, let it rain. Perhaps—

Zing! What was that? Something very like a sledge-hammer hit her line.

“Got him!

“No. Oh, gee! No.” He was gone.

Was he, though? One more wild pull. Then again a slack line. What sort of fish

was this?

Line all out. She would take in a little slack. Her hand gripped the line when again there came that mighty tug.

“Got you,” she hissed.

And so she had, but for how long? The line, she knew, was strong enough. But the rod and reel? They were mere playthings. Bought for perch and rock bass, not for thirty-pound salmon. Would they do their part? She was to see.

Dropping her paddle, she settled low in her uncertain craft. A sudden rush of the fish might at any moment send her plunging into the lake. Not that she minded a ducking. She was a powerful swimmer. But could one land a salmon that way? She doubted this. And she did want that fish. What a grand feast! She’d get a picture, too. Send it to her friends—who believed her lost in a hopeless wilderness.

“Yes, I—I’ve got to get you.” She began rolling in. The reel was pitifully small. She had not done a dozen turns when the tiny handle slipped from her grasp.

Zing! sang the reel. Only by dropping the rod between her knees and pressing hard could she halt the salmon’s mad flight.

“Ah,” she breathed, “I got you.”

This time, throwing all the strength of her capable hands into the task, she reeled in until, with a sudden rush the fish broke water.

“Oh! Oh!” she stared. “What a beauty! But look! You’re up, head, tail and all. How’re you hooked, anyway?”

Before she could discover the answer he was down and away. Once again the reel sang. Once more its handle bored a hole in her right knee.

“Dum!” she exclaimed as her boat began to move. “He’s heading for the weeds. He—he’ll snag himself off.”

The boat gained momentum. Reel as she might, the fish gained ground. Deep under the surface were pike-weeds. She knew the spot, twenty yards away,

perhaps. Now fifteen. Now—

Wrapping the line about her shoe, she seized the paddle and began paddling frantically.

“Ah! That gets you.” Slowly, reluctantly, the fish gave ground. Then, driven to madness, he broke water a full fifty yards from the boat. This move gave the line a sudden slack. The boat shot sidewise and all but overturned. In a desperate effort to right herself, the girl dropped her paddle. Before the boat had steadied itself the paddle was just out of her reach.

“Oh, you! I’ll get you if I have to swim for it.”

All this time, quite unknown to the girl, something was happening in the air as well as the water. There was the sound of heavy drumming overhead. Now it lost volume, and now picked up, but never did it quite end.

Without a paddle, with her reel serving her badly, the girl was driven to desperation. Seizing the line, she began pulling it in hand over hand. This was a desperate measure; the line might break, the hook might loose its grip. No matter. It was her only chance.

Yard by yard the line coiled up in the bottom of the boat. And now, of a sudden, the thunder of some powerful motor overhead grew louder. Still, in her wild effort to win her battle, the girl was deaf to it all.

The line grew shorter and shorter, tighter and tighter. What a fish! Thirty yards away, perhaps, now twenty. Now—how should she land him? She had no gaff.

That question remained unanswered, for at that instant things began to happen. The fish, in a last mad effort to escape, leaped full three feet in air. This was far too much for the crazy craft. Over it went and with it went the girl.

That was not all; at the same instant a dark bulk loomed out of the clouds to come racing with the speed of thought towards the girl.

“An—an airplane,” she gasped. Closing her eyes, she executed a sudden dive.

This action would have proved futile, the pontoons of the plane sank deep. Fortunately, they passed some thirty feet from the spot where the girl

disappeared.

When she rose sputtering to the surface, her first thought was of the fish. No use. The line was slack, the salmon gone.

She looked up at the plane. At that moment a young aviator was peering anxiously out over the fuselage.

“Ah! There you are!” he beamed. “I’m awfully glad.”

“Why don’t you look where you’re going? You cut my line. I lost my fish.” Florence was truly angry.

“Fish? Oh, I see! You were fishing?” The young aviator stood up. He was handsome in an exciting sort of way. “But I say!” he exclaimed, “I’ll fix that. I’ve a whole leg of venison here in my old bus. What do you say we share it? Can you bake things?”

“Sure, but my aunt can do it much better.” Florence climbed upon a pontoon to shake the water out of her hair.

Five hours later, with the rain beating a tattoo on the well weathered roof of the cabin, they were seated about the hand-hewn table, the Hughes family, Florence, and the young aviator. Seven candles winked and blinked on the broad board. At the head sat Mark, and before him the first roast of wild venison the family had ever tasted. How brown and juicy it was!

“Wonderful!” Florence murmured. “How did you get it?” the words slipped unbidden from her lips.

“No secret about that,” Speed Samson, the aviator, smiled. “I’m a guide. Take people up into the mountains for fish and game. Just left a party up there. Going back in a week. It’s wonderful up there. Snow. Cold. Refreshing. Great! Want to go along?” He looked at Florence.

“Why, I—” she hesitated.

“Take you all,” his eyes swept them in a circle.

“Can’t be done just now. Thanks all the same.” It was Mark who spoke. “We’re

new here. Lots to do. Adventure will have to wait.

“Of course,” he hastened to add, “I’m not talking for Florence.”

“Oh, yes, you are!” the big girl flashed back. “I’m in this game the same as you, at least until snow flies.”

“O. K.!” the aviator laughed. “When snow flies I’ll be back. Winter up here is the time for adventure.” He was looking now at Mary, whose dark eyes shone like twin stars. “I’ll take you for a long, long ride.”

At that instant something rattled against the windowpane. Was it sleet driven by the rain or was it some spirit tapping a message, trying to tell Mary how long and eventful that ride would really be?

Next day the smiling aviator went sailing away into a clear blue sky. Florence and Mary went back to their work, but things were not quite the same. They never are after one has dreamed a bright dream.

Three days later, Florence got her fish, or was it his brother? He weighed twenty pounds. Of course that called for one more feast. Fortunately, one who works hard may enjoy a feast every day in the year and never waste much time. Truth is, only one who *does* work hard can truly enjoy any feast to its full. The Hughes family enjoyed both work and wonderful food.

CHAPTER VI
A WANDERER RETURNS

Florence stirred uneasily beneath the blankets. Morning was coming. A faint light was creeping in over the cabin loft where she and Mary slept in a great, home-made bed.

More often than not it is a sound that disturbs our late slumbers. Florence had never become quite accustomed to the morning sounds about their little farm. All her life she had lived where boats chug-chugged in the harbor and auto horns sounded in the streets. Here more often than not it was the croak of a raven, the song of some small bird, the wild laugh of a loon on the lake that awoke her.

Now, as a sharp suggestion of approaching winter filled the air, on more than one morning it was the quack-quack of some old gander of the wild duck tribe, flown to the lake from the far North, or the honk-honk of geese.

All this was music to the nature-loving girl's ear. And, of late, all of life seemed to her a great symphony full of beautiful melodies. The hard battle of summer was over. Bravely the battle had been fought. The Hughes family had come to this valley to win themselves a home. She was one of them, in spirit at least. The beginning they had made surpassed their expectations. Now, as she opened her eyes to find herself fully awake, she thought of it all.

"A ticket to adventure," she whispered low to herself, "that's what the man said he was giving me. It's been a ticket to duty and endless labor. And yet," she sighed, "I'm not complaining." A great wave of contentment swept over her. They were secure for the winter. That surely was something.

"Adventure," she laughed, silently. "Bill has had the adventure. He—"

Her thoughts broke off. From somewhere, all but inaudible, a sound had reached

her ear. More sensation than sound, she knew at once that it was made by no wild thing. But what could it be? She listened intently, but, like a song on their little battery radio, it had faded away.

Yes—her thoughts went back to her neighbor—Bill Vale had sought adventure and had found it. With his mother still in Palmer, he had packed up a generous supply of food, charged to his mother's account at the government commissary, and joining up with the dreamy-eyed prospector, Malcomb Dale, had gone away into the hills searching for gold.

"Not that Bill's mother would have objected," Florence thought. "She would have said, 'Bill is incurably romantic. The quest for gold appeals to him. All our desires in the end must be satisfied if we are to enjoy the more abundant life. Besides, what is there to do? There are six hundred men working in gangs. They will clear up our land for us and build cabins before snow flies. We shall be charged with it all, but then we have thirty years to pay.' Yes, that is exactly what Bill's mother would have said," and the thought disgusted Florence not a little.

So Bill had gone away into the mountains. The mountains, those glorious, snow-capped mountains! Florence, as she bent over her work in their large garden, had watched him start. And as she saw him disappear, she had, for the moment, envied him.

Often and often, in the sweet cool of the evening, she and Mary had talked about how, in some breathing spell, they would borrow a horse and go packing away into those mountains. The breathing spell had never come. And now, the brief autumn was here. Winter was just around the corner. Florence had no regrets. Never before had she felt so happy and secure.

Bill had been gone six weeks. The clearing and building crew had arrived while he was away. There was dead and down timber at the back of Bill's lot that would have made a fine, secure cabin, had Bill been there to point it out. He was not there. So the cabin was built of green logs. Already you could see daylight through the cracks, and Bill's mother, who had moved in with what to Florence seemed an unnecessary amount of furniture and equipment, was complaining bitterly about "the way the government has treated us poor folks."

Bill had returned at last. Sore-footed and ragged, his food gone, his high-priced rifle red with rust, he had returned triumphant. He had found gold. In the spring

he would begin operations in a big way. Proudly he displayed six tiny nuggets, none of them bigger than a pea.

“Seeds,” old John McQueen had called them. “Golden seeds of discontent.” But to Bill they were marvelous. For him they hid the cracks in their cabin, his unplowed field, his uncut woodpile. And, because she doted on her son, they hid all these things from his mother’s eyes as well—at least, for a time.

“Poor Bill!” Florence sighed, as she snuggled down beneath the blankets. “He’s such a dreamer. He—”

There was that strange sound again, like a speedboat motor. She laughed at the thought of a speedboat on their tiny lake. But now, as before, it faded away.

Yes, with her help, the Hughes family had won. Their summer had been a complete success. How they had worked, morning to night. Mosquitoes and flies, tough sod and weeds, they had battled them all. And how they had been rewarded! Never had plants grown and flourished as theirs did. Mark’s tomatoes were a complete success. Twice, it was true, the mercury dropped to a point perilously near freezing and their heads rested on uneasy pillows. But the Alaskan weather man had been kind. Their bright red harvest, “bushels and bushels of tomatoes,” had come and had been sold at unbelievable prices. All along the Alaskan railroad, people had gone wild about their marvelous tomatoes.

“And now,” the girl heaved another happy sigh. Now their little sodded-in cellar was packed full of potatoes, beets, turnips, and carrots; their shelves were lined with home-canned wild fruit, raspberries, blueberries, high bush cranberries, and their storeroom crowded with groceries, all paid for. What was more, a horse! “Old Nig,” bought from a discouraged settler, was in their small log barn. It was marvelous, truly marvelous! And yet, in this wild land full of possible exciting events, they had known no adventure.

“Duty first,” John McQueen had said to her once. “And when duty is done, let adventure come as it may. And it *will* come.”

“Good old McQueen,” she sighed. “God surely knows all our needs. He sends us such men.”

Suddenly her feet hit the floor with a bound. She had heard that sound once

more. It was the drum of an airplane motor. She judged by the sound that it was circling for a landing, perhaps on their little lake. How wonderful! Was it their friend, the young aviator? Had he come for them? Her blood raced.

“Mary!” she fairly screamed. “Wake up! An airplane! And it’s going to land. It’s landing right now.”

They jumped into their clothes and were out on the cabin steps just in time to see the beautiful blue and gray airplane, graceful as any wild fowl, circle low to a perfect landing.

With mad scurrying, wild ducks and geese were off the water and away on the wing, leaving the intruders to the perfect quiet of a glorious autumn morning.

A short time later they were all at the water’s edge, Florence, Mary, Mark, Bill, and Dave. The hydroplane had been anchored. Three men had just put off in a small boat.

“Hello, there,” one of them shouted. “How’s the chances for sourdough pancakes and coffee?” It was Speed Samson.

“Fine!” Florence laughed. “Plate of hots coming up.”

“This is not to be our trip.” There was a note of disappointment in Florence’s tone as she murmured these words to Mary. “He’s got a hunting party. Probably going after moose or grizzly bears.” Nevertheless, she was ready enough to offer to the party the true hospitality of the north. Soon their plates were piled high with cakes, their cups steaming with fragrant brown coffee.

As Florence sat talking to them, one of the men, all rigged out in hunting belt filled with shells, riding breeches and high boots, seemed familiar to her. Who was he? For the life of her, she could not think.

It was Mary who dispelled her doubt. “Florence,” once they were alone in the kitchen, she gripped her arm hard, “that man’s the one who roared at the little Eskimo, Mr. Il-ay-ok, back there on the dock in Anchorage.”

“That’s right,” Florence’s whisper rose shrill and high. “I don’t like him and I don’t think I ever shall.”

“Why did he hate that little man?”

“Who knows?” Florence answered hastily. “Anyway, his name is Peter Loome.”

“How—how do you know that?”

Florence did not catch this, she was already hurrying away.

“We’re bound for the big-game hunting ground,” one of the men was explaining to Mark. “Wonderful sport! Wild sheep and goats, moose and big brown bear!”

“Man, you’re lucky!” Bill exclaimed.

Mark made no response.

“Your motor don’t sound just right,” Mark said as the conversation lagged.

“What’s wrong with it?” the young pilot demanded.

“Can’t quite tell,” Mark puckered his brow.

“Ever fly?” The pilot looked at him sharply.

“No-o. But then your motor’s just like the ones we had in some speedboats back in the Copper Country. I tinkered with them. You get to know by the sound,” Mark replied modestly.

“Want to turn her over once or twice?” the pilot invited.

“Sure. Be glad to.”

Two hours later grim, greasy, but triumphant, Mark emerged from the plane. He had located the trouble and had remedied it.

“Say-ee, you’re good!” the pilot was enthusiastic. “Want to go along as my mechanic? Grand trip! Shoot goats, bears, moose, and—”

“Can’t get away just now,” said Mark quietly. “Thanks all the same.”

Just the same, there was a look of longing in his eye that Florence knew all too well. He had two passions, had Mark. He loved growing things and wonderful

machinery. Growing was over for this year. Dull, dreary days of autumn were at hand. For him, to spend two weeks or even a month watching over that matchless motor would be bliss.

“No-o,” he repeated slowly, almost mournfully. “I can’t go. There is still work to be done before snow flies.”

“Say!” Bill put in. “Take me. I’ll go.”

“Know anything about motors?”

“Sure, a lot,” Bill, never too modest, replied.

“All right. Get your things.” A half hour later, Bill sailed off to one more adventure.

“Yes,” Florence thought with a grim smile. “He’s spent two weeks felling green trees to cut with his new buzz-saw. Be fine wood in twelve months. But how about next January? Poor Bill!”

Strange to say, the one thought that often haunted both Florence and Mary was the realization that their splendid cabin had been built by someone else. That this someone had hidden a big copper kettle and, perhaps, seven golden candlesticks near the cabin, then had gone away, did not seem to matter. “What if they should come back?” Florence asked herself over and over.

Then, one bright autumn day, their dark dream came true. Busy in the kitchen, Florence did not notice the approach of a stranger. Only when she heard heavy footsteps outside did she hurry into the large front room. Then, through the open door, she heard a loud sigh, followed by the creak of a bench as a heavy person settled upon it. After that, in a voice she could not mistake, though she had never heard it before, there came: “Ah! Home at last!”

“Madam Chicaski, the original owner of the cabin,” the girl thought in wild consternation. “She has returned!”

CHAPTER VII
AND THEN CAME ADVENTURE

When you buy a house, or even a cabin in the wilderness, how much of it do you really buy? All of it or only part? The walls, the roof, the floor, surely all these are yours. But all those other things, the little cupboard in the corner, all carved out from logs with crude tools, but done so well for someone who has been loved—do you buy this too? And all the other delicate touches that made a house a home, can you buy these or do you only try to buy these and fail? It was thus that Florence thought as she sat dreaming in the sun outside the cabin.

From within came the sound of voices. Her aunt and Madam Chicaski were talking. Already her aunt had come to love the company of this huge Russian woman who had first made this cabin into a home.

A week had passed and still the woman lingered. How long would she stay? No one knew nor seemed to care overmuch. She insisted on working, this stout old woman. And how she did work! When Mark began going to the forest cutting dead trees and dragging them in with the tractor for the winter's supply of wood, she shouldered an axe and went along. Then how the trees came crashing down! Even Mark was no match for her. In five days a great pile of wood loomed up beside the cabin. High time, too, for the first flurry of snow had arrived.

That Madam Chicaski had a gentler side they learned as she talked beside the fire in the long evenings. She told of her own adventure on this very spot when the valley was all but unknown and life for her was new. Many things she told, tales that brought forth smiles and tears.

One subject she never touched upon, nor was she asked to tell, what had become of the great copper kettle, the seven golden candlesticks and all else that had been left behind. "If she stays long enough, in time I shall know," Florence assured herself.

There were other things she did not tell. Why had she left the valley and how? Where was her husband now? This much was certain, she was not now in want. Florence had come upon her one afternoon unobserved. She was thumbing a large roll of bills. At the slightest sound she concealed them under her ample dress.

At times she acted strangely. She would go to the back of the yard and stand, for a quarter hour or more, contemplating the great stump. Over this, during the summer, morning-glories had bloomed in profusion. At that moment it was covered only by dry and rustling vines. At such times as this on the Russian woman's face was a look of devotion. "Like one saying her prayers," Florence thought.

There came a day when, for a time at least, all thoughts of the mysterious Madam Chicaski were banished from the little family's thoughts. Mystery was replaced by thrilling adventure.

Once again the air was filled with sound. A large, gray hydroplane came zooming in from the west. They were waiting at the water's edge, the Hughes family and Madam, when the pilot taxied his plane close in to shore. Florence was not there. She was away on a visit to Palmer.

"How would you like to paddle out and get me?" the pilot invited as he climbed out upon the fuselage.

Mark rowed out in their small home-made skiff.

"I'm on an errand of mercy," the man explained at once, "and I'm going to need some help. Just received a message by short-wave radio that some men are in trouble up in the mountains."

"Hunters?" Mark suggested.

"Yes."

"In a blue and gray plane?" Mary's dark eyes widened. How about Bill, she was thinking. Despite his shortcomings, Bill held a large place in slender Mary's heart.

"Any—any one hurt?" she asked.

“One of the hunters has been badly handled by a bear,” the man went on. “Something’s gone wrong with their motor, too. They can’t bring him out.”

“Bear?” said Mark. “That’s sure to be Bill. He’d march right up and shoot a bear in the eye.”

“Yes—yes, it must be Bill,” Mary exclaimed, striving in vain to control her emotions. “We must do something to help him. What can we do?” Months shut away from the outside world had drawn their little company close together. Bound by bonds of friendship and mutual understanding, despite the faults of some, they were very close to one another.

“You can help a great deal,” said the pilot, “that is,” he hesitated, “if you’re willing to take a chance.”

“A—a chance?” Mary stammered.

“Sure,” the man smiled, “you look like a good nurse. Your brother, here, I am told, is a fine motor mechanic. Climb in the plane and come along with me—both of you.”

“A ticket to adventure!” The words so often repeated now echoed in Mary’s ears.

“What do you say?” Mark turned to her.

“There—there’s still work to be done,” she stammered.

“The work can wait. This appears a plain call of duty.” Mark’s voice trembled ever so slightly.

“All right. We’ll go.” Mary felt a thrill course up her spine. At the same instant she caught the eye of Dave Kennedy. In those fine eyes she read something quite wonderful, a look of admiration and yet of concern.

She and Dave had become great friends. Dave was a wonderful fellow. His Scotch mother was small, quite frail, yet altogether lovely. When their logs in their cabin walls had begun to warp, Dave and his father had sodded it up, quite to the eaves. Now they were all set for winter.

“I’ll look after your horse and cow and—and cut the wood,” Dave said huskily.

“I only wish I might take your place.” He looked Mary squarely in the eye.

“I’m glad you can’t,” she laughed, looking away. “I’m sure it will be a wonderful adventure.”

“Cold up there,” suggested the pilot. “We shall need blankets and food. We may have to freeze in and fly out on skis.”

The Hughes family was not stingy. A huge cart-load of supplies was carried to the water’s edge, then ferried to the airplane.

“I stay,” said stout Madam Chicaski. “I stay until you come back. I look after everything.” Mary’s heart warmed to this powerful old woman.

“Goodbye,” she screamed as the motor thundered. “Goodbye, everyone.” A moment later, for the first time in her life, she was rising toward the upper spaces where clouds are made.

The moments that followed will ever remain like the memory of a dream in the girl’s mind. Though the motor roared, they appeared to be standing still in mid-air while a strangely beautiful world glided beneath them. Here a ribbon that was a stream wound on between dark green bands that were fringes of forest, here a tiny lake mirrored the blue sky, there a broad stretch of swamp-land lay brown and drear, while ever before them, seeming to beckon them on—to what, to service or to death?—were the snow-capped mountains.

So an hour passed. Swamps vanished. Jagged rocks appeared. Hemlock and spruce, dark as night, stood out between fields of glistening snow.

And then, with a quick intake of breath, Mary sighted a tiny lake. Half hidden among rocky crags, it seemed the most marvelous part of this dream that was not a dream. And yes—clutching at her breast to still her heart’s wild beating, she shouted to her silent, awe-struck brother:

“That is the place!”

Nor was she wrong. With a sudden thundering swoop that set her head spinning, the powerful ship of the air circled low for a landing.

“Now!” she breathed, and again, “Now!”

One instant it seemed they would graze the rocks to the left of them, the next the bank of trees to the right. And then—

“What was that?” Mark shouted suddenly.

As the pontoons of the plane touched the surface of the lake, there had come a strange ripping sound.

They had not long to wait for the answer. Hardly had the airplane taxied to a spot twenty feet from a shelving bank, when the plane began settling on one side.

“Tough luck!” exclaimed the pilot. “A little ice formed on the lake. Must have punctured a pontoon. No real danger, I guess. Those fellows should be here any —”

“Yes! Yes! There they are now!” Mary exclaimed, pointing to a spot where two men were putting off in a small boat.

The boat, she saw at once, was one used on their own small lake not so many days before. In a narrow cove she sighted the blue and gray airplane.

“Well!” laughed their pilot. “Here we are.”

“Yes,” the girl thought soberly. “Here we are. Two hundred miles from anywhere in a frozen wilderness. Two disabled airplanes. Food for a month. One injured boy. Fine outlook.”

The instant her eyes fell upon the men in the boat she experienced one more shock. Peter Loome, the man with a hard face, who hated all Eskimos, was there. She barely suppressed a shudder. Just why she feared and all but hated this man she was not able at that moment to say.

She was not one to see the dull gray side of life’s little cloud for long. The instant they reached the improvised camp she asked after the injured person and was not surprised to find that it was Bill.

“That bear,” Bill drawled as she dressed the rather deep wounds on his arms and chest, “took an unfair advantage of me. He could run a lot faster’n any man. And he ran the wrong way. Funny part was, when he got up with me, he wanted to hug me. If he hadn’t been badly hurt, he’d have killed me.”

“If you’d left him alone in the first place, probably he wouldn’t have bothered you,” Mary said soberly.

“No-o, probably not,” Bill replied ruefully.

“Oh, well,” one of the hunters consoled him, “you’ll have his skin for a rug back there in your cabin this winter.”

“Not for me,” Bill exploded. “I’ve been cold long enough. That cabin leaks air. Soon’s I get back I’ll be startin’ for old Alabam’, or at least some place that’s warm.”

Mary frowned but said nothing. Already she had come to love that valley where their cabin stood by the little lake. If it was her good fortune to return there in safety she would not ask for more. As for Bill, he had, she thought, brought all his troubles upon himself. But Bill was wounded and ill. What he needed, at the moment, was kindness and gentle care, not advice.

That night Mary and Mark sat down for some time beside a glowing campfire. Bill was resting well, would sleep, they thought, quietly. The others, too, had retired.

“Mark,” the girl’s tone was sober, “I’ve always wanted adventure. Most young people want adventure in one form or another, I guess. But when it comes—”

“It doesn’t seem so wonderful after all,” Mark laughed low.

“Well, no,” his sister agreed.

“May not be so bad after all,” Mark said cheerfully. “While you were taking care of Bill, we floated three large dry logs out to our damaged ship. We lashed them to the pontoon support. That means she won’t sink any more. And when we are frozen in, we—”

“Frozen in!” Mary was startled. She had realized in a vague sort of way that at this very moment the thin ice on the lake was hardening, that they could not hope to get away on pontoons, yet the thought of a forced wait was disturbing.

“How—how long?” she managed to ask.

“Perhaps ten days, perhaps a month. Depends on the weather.”

“Ten days, a month!” The girl’s head swam. Adventure! Surely this was it!

“But, Mark,” her voice was low with emotion, “so many things might happen. A storm may come roaring up the mountainside and—”

“And wreck the planes beyond repair. Yes, but we’ll do our best and we must trust God for the rest.”

“Yes,” the girl thought. “We must trust Him and do our best.”

Then, because she did not wish longer to dwell upon their own position, she forced her thoughts into other channels. She tried to picture the folks at home—mother, quietly knitting by the fire, Florence, if she were back from Palmer, poring over a book, and silent, occupied only with her thoughts, the strange Madam Chicaski.

How often she had wished she might read that woman’s thoughts. Did she sometimes think of the missing copper kettle and the seven golden candlesticks? If so, what did she think? What was in her mind as she stood for a long time staring at the great stump?

“We’ll get away from here,” the girl thought at last. “We’ll go back to our snug cabin and the joys of winter. How peaceful and secure we shall be. Let the wind roar. We shall be snug and warm.

“And Sunday! What a day that will be! The Petersons with the twins will come over in a bobsled, and the Dawsons in their home-made cutter. The Sabins have a dog team. What sings we shall have!

“Mark!” she exclaimed. “It’s too bad you had to give up training your dogs.” Mark had befriended five shaggy dogs deserted by settlers gone back to the States.

“Be back to the dogs before you know it. Besides,” Mark laughed a low, merry laugh, “there’s the cat. What the dogs can’t do, the cat can.” (He was speaking of his caterpillar tractor. They called these “cats” for short.)

“Yes,” Mary joined in the laugh. “But it will be truly thrilling to have a dog

team. Wish we had it right now. Then if everything went wrong we could drive out."

"Yes, but everything won't go wrong." Mark rose and yawned sleepily. "You'll see."

"Will we see?" the girl asked herself as, a quarter of an hour later, she crept beneath heavy blankets to lie down upon a bed of sweet-scented boughs. She knew their plans in a general sort of way. The gray plane carried skis. The blue and gray one had none. Mark and the pilots would work on the disabled motor of the blue and gray. If they got it working they would make skis for it. The two planes would take off on skis as soon as the ice was safe.

"A ticket to adventure," she whispered. "When and how will our adventure end? Ah, well, Mr. McQueen says that so long as our adventure comes in the line of duty, Providence will see us through, so surely there is nothing to fear." With this comforting thought, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER VIII
A SECRET IS TOLD

To Mary the days that followed were strange beyond belief. The beauty of mountain sunshine on glistening snow, gray rocks, and black forests was entrancing. The sudden up-rushing of a storm, threatening as it did to destroy their only means of escape, was terrifying beyond words.

Many and many were the times that she wished that it might have been Florence who had been whirled off on this wild adventure instead of herself. “She is so much stronger than I,” she said to Mark. “She has seen so much more of life and seems so much older.”

“You had your first-aid lessons in school,” Mark said, a note of encouragement in his tone. “This is one grand opportunity for putting them into practice.”

“Sure,” Bill agreed, overhearing the conversation. “I’m so tough you couldn’t kill me off any way you try.”

“I won’t try to kill you off, Bill.” Mary’s tone was all too sober.

“I know, Mary,” Bill’s voice suddenly went husky. “You’re one grand gal. I don’t deserve half I get, big bum that I am.

“But say,” his voice dropped to a mere whisper, “perhaps I shouldn’t say it, but I wouldn’t have got it so bad if that fellow Peter Loome had done his part.”

“Done his part?” Mary stared.

“Sure. Don’t you know? He was with me. Had a powerful 30-40 rifle in his hands. Saw the bear come after me when I fired and what did he do but stand right still and laugh! Roared good and plenty as if it was all being done in the movies. When I yelled at him he did limber up and get in a shot or two. I never

did make him out. Something loose in his make-up, I guess."

"Something sure," Mark agreed solemnly. Right then and there he wished Loome had not chanced to be one of the party.

"Not a bit of help, that fellow," he added after a moment's silence. "Grumbles about everything, always demanding that we get going at once, insists he is losing a chance at big money by the delay. Then, when we give him an opportunity to help he bungles everything. I never saw such a fellow."

"Big money," Mary thought to herself. "Wonder if that has anything to do with Mr. Il-ay-ok, the Eskimo, and that far north country?" She was to know.

Daily, under her nursing, Bill improved. Nightly, but oh, so slowly, the ice on the lake thickened.

Each day the men labored at the task of making the planes fit for travel. Mark's genius for fixing things at last won over the sulky motor. Once again it purred sweetly or thundered wildly at man's will.

Slowly, painstakingly, the men hewed from solid logs, skis for the smaller plane. Would these, cut from green wood, as they must be, stand the strain of taking off? They must wait and see.

To escape haunting, unnamed fears, Mary began exploring the mountain ledges. First she sought out a wild animal trail leading down, down, down, over tumbled rocks, through aisles of trees, over the frozen bed of a narrow stream to a spot where the land appeared to drop from beneath her. Creeping out on a flat rock, she gazed in awed silence down a sheer four hundred feet or more to the treetops of one more forest. Was the trail she found, made by wild sheep and goats, safe for men? She doubted it, yet the time might come when they must follow that trail or starve. She returned silent and thoughtful.

That night a storm swept up from the valley. All night her small tent bulged, flapped and cracked. All night she shuddered beneath her blankets, as she listened to the men shouting to one another down there on the frozen lake. They were, she knew, battling the storm, straining at guy ropes to save the planes.

At dawn the wind died away. The temperature dropped. As she drew her feet from the blankets she found the air unbelievably cold.

“Freezing fast,” she thought. “Just what we want if only—”

She did not finish. Instead, she hurried into her clothes and then, after racing to a rocky ledge, found to her consternation that, for a space of seconds, she did not have the courage to look down at the lake. That one look would be the answer to a question that meant great hope or near despair.

One look at last, then a drop to her knees as she murmured:

“Thank God.” The planes were safe.

Next instant she was on her feet and racing to camp ready to serve hot coffee and sourdough pancakes to the battlers of the night.

“Boo! How gloriously cold!” exclaimed the older of the two pilots. “A day and a night of this and we shall be away.”

There was still some work to be done on the plane. The storm had strained at every strut and guy. It was necessary to test all these and to tighten some. That night, after a hasty supper, the men made their way back to the frozen surface of the lake.

With Bill snugly tucked away in the tent at her back, Mary sat before a glowing fire of spruce logs. How grand was the night, after that storm! Not a cloud was in the sky. Not soon would she forget it, dark spruce trees towering toward the sky, gray walls of rocks like grim fortresses of some mythical giant, the cold, still white of snow and above it all, a great, golden moon.

“The North!” she murmured. “Ah, the North!”

And yet, as she thought of it now, they were not so very far north. She looked up and away at the north star and wondered vaguely about Florence’s grandfather, Tom Kennedy, way up there almost beneath that star. Tom Kennedy was not her grandfather, he was on the other side of Florence’s family, yet, so intimate had the relations between herself and her big cousin become, she felt a sudden, burning desire to accompany her on her quest for her grandfather, if indeed the quest was ever begun.

Had she but known it, Florence was at that very moment in Anchorage making inquiries regarding transportation to Nome. Only a few days before, Mark,

having received his last payment for the summer's crop, had pressed a crisp new fifty-dollar bill into her reluctant hand.

"You earned it and much more," had been his husky reply to her protest. "You've been a regular farm hand and—and a brick."

Fifty dollars! What could one not do with that? It seemed now that nothing much could be done. Had there been a boat, it might have been possible to secure steerage passage. There was no boat, ice had closed sea transportation for nine long months.

"Your only chance is the air-mail plane," a kindly storekeeper assured her, "and air travel costs money in the north. Nothing like what it was in the days of dog-team travel, but plenty. Fifty dollars? Why, Miss, that wouldn't buy oil for the trip. Better wait for spring. Then you can go by boat."

Wait until spring? Nine months? Spring? That was time for work on the little valley farm. "Winter is the time for adventure," she recalled the young aviator's words.

"I'll manage it some way. I—I've got to," she turned suddenly away.

Meantime, in her mountain fastness, Mary was thinking of the long-lost grandfather and wondering vaguely about Mr. Il-ay-ok, the Eskimo, when, catching a slight sound, she looked up to see Peter Loome sitting beside her.

This sudden discovery was startling. By the light of the fire this man's face was more repulsive than by day. She wondered, with a touch of panic, why he was here. Then, reassured by the nearness of Bill in the tent and of her friends below on the lake, she settled back in her place.

For a long time they sat there in silence with the eyes of night, the stars, looking down upon them. Then, because she could endure the silence no longer, and because she truly wanted to know, Mary said, "Mr. Loome, why do you hate that little Eskimo who calls himself Mr. Il-ay-ok?"

"Why, I," the man started, "I—well, you see, he's in my way, er—that is, he wants to be. He won't be long. I—" the man's voice rose, "I'll smash him!" His foot crashed down upon the rocks. "Like that!"

“Why?” Mary’s voice was low.

For some time there came no answer. In the sky a star began sliding. It cut a circle and disappeared in the dark blue of night. A streak of light reached for the milky way. Northern lights, the girl thought.

Suddenly the man spoke. “I don’t mind tellin’ you. You’ll never be up there,” he pointed toward the north. “None of you dirt-diggers down here will ever be up there where the north begins, where men and dogs fight fer what they git an’ ask neither odds ner quarters.”

Mary caught her breath as he paused. He is sort of a rough poet she thought. At that moment she almost admired him. But not for long.

“It’s the reindeer,” he burst out. “Eskimo’s got ’em. Too many of ’em. What does an Eskimo know about makin’ money? Nothin’! Then what’s the good of him havin’ all them reindeer? No good!” He spat on the snow.

“Well, at last the Government is seein’ reason,” he went on after a time. “The Government’s told the Eskimo they gotta take their reindeer back—back—back, way back to the mountains where there’s plenty of feed.

“Think the Eskimos’ll do it?” He squinted his eyes at her. “Narry a one. They’ll stick to the shore. They’ll hunt seal an’ walrus, or starve. That’s where their homes is, on the coast, allus has been, allus will be.

“So,” his voice dropped. “So they’ll sell their reindeer, sell ’em cheap. And who’ll buy? Me! Me and my company. We got money. We’ll get rich on reindeer. Reindeer!” Leaping to his feet, he started pacing like some wild beast before the fire.

“This Il-ay-ok,” he went on after a time. “He thinks he can stop us. He’s educated. Think of it! Educated! An Eskimo educated!” he laughed hoarsely.

“He seemed such a nice, polite little man,” Mary ventured.

“Well, maybe he is. Polite!” one more burst of laughter. “But he won’t get nowhere with politeness. He’s outside now, down in Washington. The last boat’s come from up yonder. No more for nine months. Reindeer got to get into the mountains before this old year dies. What can this polite Il-ay-ok do about that?”

“There are airplanes,” Mary suggested.

“Yes. Like them down there!” the man exploded. “I wish to—they’d get the things going. He might escape me, your polite, greasy little Es-ki-mo.

“‘Dear little Es-ki-mo,’” he chanted hoarsely, “‘Leave all your ice and snow. Come play with me.’ I used to sing that in school. Can you e-mag-ine!” His laugh rose louder than before. Then, of a sudden, it faded. Footsteps were heard approaching.

“Well,” Mark said cheerfully. “Everything is O. K. We’ll be out of here in twenty-four hours.”

“Good! That-a-boy!” Peter Loome patted him on the back.

As for Mary, she suddenly found herself wishing that their stay here might be prolonged, she was thinking of the polite little man who called himself “Mr. Il-ay-ok.”

CHAPTER IX
HELP FROM THE SKY

True to Mark's prophecy, dawn of the following day found them on the move. By the light of a candle, hotcakes and coffee had been stowed away under their belts. Now they were ready to pack up.

As Mary stepped from the tent her eyes fell upon a pair of lifeless eyes that seemed to stare down upon her. One of the hunters had killed a moose. All this time, well out of the reach of thieving wild creatures, its head had hung there in a tree. It seemed now a little strange that those dead eyes could give her such a start.

"Nonsense!" she whispered, stamping her foot. "Enough to dread without that." And indeed there was. Despite the fact that the men agreed on the solidness of the ice, she dreaded the take-off. What if the ice were thinner in some places than at others? What if it should give way at just the wrong time? What of the planes? Were they truly fit for service? And what of those hand-made skis? All these fears were banished by the excitement of breaking camp. Tents were taken down, bedding was made into bundles, and bags were packed. Bill, now quite able to walk, but with arms still smothered in bandages, was helped down the trail.

Mary thrilled anew as she approached the small blue and gray plane. "A ticket to adventure," she whispered for the hundredth time. Then her face sobered. Was this to be the end of adventure or only its beginning? An hour's safe flying would bring them to the cabin where there awaited dishes to wash, beds to make, paths to shovel, all the daily round. "Yes," she told herself with renewed interest, "yes, and Madam Chicaski to wonder about. Where adventure ends, mystery begins."

One thing pleased her, she was to travel with Bill and Mark in the smaller plane.

She liked being with her friends. She was very fond of Speed Samson, the smiling young pilot. She feared and hated Peter Loome.

“I am taking the hunters straight to Anchorage. They seem to be in one grand rush,” Dave Breen, pilot of the large gray plane, said. Then aside to Mary he whispered, “They’re paying me well. Hunt me up in Anchorage and I’ll buy you a hot fudge sundae.” Mary smiled her thanks. They were fine fellows, these pilots, just how fine she was later to learn.

The take-off was exciting. She shuddered as they glided over the ice. An ominous crack-crack-crack sent chills up her spine, yet the ice held. There had been a light snowfall. The snow was sticky, it would not let them go. Round and round the lake they whirled. Louder and louder the motors thundered. Then someone shouted “Up!” and up they went whirling away over the treetops.

Once again the glorious panorama of dark forest, gray crags, winding streams and blankets of snow lay beneath them.

“We’re going home! Home!” Mary shouted in Mark’s ear. Mark nodded soberly. He was listening. Listening for what? Mary knew well enough, for trouble, motor trouble.

“There will be no trouble,” she assured herself. Once again she thought of home. What a place of joy that once deserted valley of the North had become for them. She thought of the worried millions in the cities and scattered over the plain far to the south of them—worried millions wondering where the next week’s food supply was to come from. She thought of their well-lined cupboards, of their cellar bursting with good things to eat, then sighed a sigh of content.

This mood was short-lived. Even she caught and understood the strange shudders that shook the small plane. A moment of this and they went circling downward toward the shining white surface of a small lake. Once again her heart was in her mouth. They had left the higher altitudes where the nights were bitter cold. They were equipped with skis. Would this new lake be frozen hard enough for that? Scarcely time for these few flashing thoughts and bump—they hit the lake. Bump—bump—bump. What glorious bumps those were. They meant one more happy landing.

Dismounting, the girl stared aloft while the large gray plane circled over them. Once, twice, three times it circled through the blue, then, with a sudden burst of

speed, like some wild duck that had heard the bang of a hunter's gun, it sped straight away.

Florence was walking disconsolately back and forth along the pier at Anchorage early that same afternoon. She was deep in her own thoughts. Having gone for a visit to Palmer, she had been invited to come for a stay at Anchorage. Sending a note back to her cousins, she had taken the train for Anchorage.

Strangely enough, Mary had met high adventure, while she was meeting with bitter disappointment. She had so hoped that her lone fifty-dollar bill would somehow carry her to that charmed city of her grandfather, Nome, Alaska.

"No chance!" she murmured low. "Not a chance in the world." And yet, she dared hope.

Now catching the drone of an airplane motor, she shaded her eyes to look away toward the east. Standing where she was, she watched the large gray plane come driving in, then circling low, make a perfect landing.

"Oh!" she breathed. "If only—" she did not finish, but marched soberly on her way.

Having made a round of the city's stores, she was headed back to the home of her hostess. "Tomorrow," she thought, "I shall go back to our happy valley." But would it be so happy for her? When one longs to be in one place, can he be truly happy in another? Who knows? As it turned out, Florence would not be obliged to test her ability to be happy.

Of a sudden, as she walked along, she heard someone call: "Florence! Florence Huyler!" Turning about, she found herself facing a total stranger.

"You are Florence Huyler," the man smiled.

"How—how did you know?" she gasped.

"If you hadn't been, you wouldn't have turned about so quickly," he laughed. "Ever try calling out quite loudly, 'John!' at the edge of a large crowd? No, of course not. Just try it sometime. You'll be surprised at the number of Johns that turn to answer.

“But that—” his voice changed, “that’s not the point. Suppose you heard of the accident?”

“Accident? No! I—” her face paled.

“Now, now! nothing to be excited about,” he warned. “You’ve been away from home so you haven’t heard. Your friend Bill got clawed up a bit by a bear. Say!” his voice rose. “Want to come in here and sit on a stool while I tell you? I’m dying for a cup of coffee.”

“Al—all right.”

Three minutes later, their feet dangling from stools, they were drinking coffee, munching doughnuts, and talking.

“So you see,” the aviator ended his story, “your cousin did me a mighty fine turn. I got a good fee for bringing those hunters out and so if you or he ever need a lift, just signal me by Morse code or any other way and I’ll turn my motor over P.D.Q.

“Of course,” he added, “I’m off to Nome tomorrow, but I’ll be back. Back before you know it. Not such a long trip that.

“But say!” he exclaimed. “What’s the matter?” The girl’s face had turned purple.

“Choked! Well, I’ll be! Here, let me—” He began pounding her on the back.

“Just—just a—a—piece of dough—doughnut,” she managed to sputter at last. “Went—dow—down the wrong way.”

“Do you get that way often?” he grinned.

“Only when people tell me they’re going to Nome.”

“What’s so awful about that?”

“Awful? It’s glorious. If only—”

“If only what?”

“If only I were going!”

“And why not?”

Fishing in her pocket, she displayed her only banknote.

“That’s good money,” the pilot felt of it with thumb and finger.

“But not enough,” she shook her head sadly.

“For what?”

“A trip to Nome.”

“To Nome! You want to go to Nome? You’re off, child! You’re off right now. There’s just room for one more. Got the Bowmans to take up, three of ’em. Big reindeer people. Grand folks! Just room for you.”

“Tha—” Florence could not finish. She had choked again, but not on a doughnut. Mutely she held out the crumpled bill.

“Put it in your pocket, child,” his tone was gruff but kind, “you’ll need it. But say! Why do you want to go to Nome?”

“Got a grandfather up there.”

“And haven’t seen him for a long time,” he added for her.

“Never saw him!”

“What? Never saw your grandfather? Say! That’s terrible. I had two of ’em. Grand old sports. Both gone now. Say! That’s great! And you’re going with me to hunt up your grandfather. That, why that’s like moving pictures. Going? Of course you’re going! Due to take off at nine a. m.” He slid off the stool, then held out a hand. “Glad to have met you. Meet you again right here at 8:30 tomorrow morning. Will you be here?”

Would she? If necessary she would form a one-man line and stand right here in the snow and cold until the sun rose and the clock said a half hour after eight.

CHAPTER X
IN SEARCH OF A GRANDFATHER

Nothing very serious had happened to the blue and gray plane that was carrying Mary and her friends toward their home.

“A loose wire connection, that’s all,” the pilot explained as he read the worry wrinkles on the girl’s brow. “Have it fixed before you know it. And then—”

“Home,” Mary breathed. How she loved that word. Would she ever want to leave that home again?

A half hour later they were once again in the air. One more half hour and their skis touched the frozen surface of their own small lake.

“Welcome home,” Dave shouted as he came racing toward them. “Just in time for a feast. Tim Barber got a deer yesterday. We’re having a roast of it for dinner, your mother and—”

“And Madam Chicaski?”

“Oh, sure!” Dave laughed. “You couldn’t drive her away. And who’d want to? She’s been a splendid help to your mother, milked the cow, fed the horse, hauled wood, everything. And now,” he laughed, “I think she’s fixing to run a trap-line. From somewhere she’s dug out a lot of rusty traps and is shining them up.”

“Has she—” Mary hesitated.

“Revealed her secrets—copper kettle, golden candlesticks, all that? Not a word.

“But Mary,” Dave took both her hands. “How good it is to see you back.”

“I—I’m glad to be back, David,” Mary blushed in spite of herself.

“And how about me?” Bill demanded in a bantering tone. “You should be glad I’m back.”

“We are, Bill,” Mrs. Hughes said with a friendly smile. “Awfully glad to have you back.”

“But you’ll not have me long. Boo!” Bill shuddered. “I’m off with the wild birds for a warmer climate.”

“You’ll be back, Bill,” the elder McQueen rumbled. “You’ve been a pioneer for a summer. After that you may not want to be a pioneer, but you’ll be one all the same. The snow-peaked mountains, the timber that turns to green in spring and gold in autumn, the lure of gold, the call of the wild will bring you back.”

“I don’t know about that.” For once Bill’s face took on a sober look.

Turning about, Mrs. Hughes led them all, like a brood of chicks, to the cabin where the delicious odor of roast venison greeted their nostrils. Over that venison, now turning it, now testing, and now turning again, large, silent, mysterious, hovered Madam Chicaski.

“So you’re going to Nome by plane?” the eyes of Mrs. Maver, Florence’s gray-haired hostess at Anchorage, shone. “Going with the Bowmans? Why, that’s splendid. They are old friends of ours. We knew them before they went to Nome. I must have them over to dinner.” And she did.

“So you’re going north with us?” Mrs. Bowman, a round, jolly person, beamed on Florence as they entered the small parlor to await the announcement of dinner. “Never been there before, have you?”

“No, I—”

“You’ll enjoy it. Why, you’re just the sort of girl for that country. Healthy! Look at her cheeks, John,” Mrs. Bowman turned to her husband.

“You’d make a grand prospector,” Mr. Bowman, a large, ruddy-faced man, laughed. “Going after gold, I suppose.”

“I—I might,” Florence admitted timidly. “But first I must find my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather?” Mrs. Bowman stared at her. “Is he in Nome?”

“Yes, I—”

“Look, John!” Mrs. Bowman broke in excitedly. “This is Tom Kennedy’s granddaughter. She, why, she’s the living image of him!”

“You are right, my dear,” the husband admitted.

“Oh! And do I truly look like him?” Florence’s mind went into a wild whirl. “I am his granddaughter, but who’d have thought—”

“That we could tell it? That is strange. But such things do happen. Shall we be seated?” Mrs. Bowman took a chair.

“Let me tell you,” she leaned forward, “your grandfather is a wonderful man, truly remarkable.”

“He—he is?” Florence stared. “I thought—”

“That he was just an old sourdough prospector,” Mr. Bowman put in. “Not a bit of it. He is a prospector, has been for thirty-five years. Found gold once and lost it again to save his partner’s life. Yes, a prospector, but a long beard, hair to the shoulders, beer guzzler always dreaming about the past? Not a bit of it! Tom Kennedy is young, young as a boy. Keen as any youngster, too.”

“And clean,” Mrs. Bowman put in. “Never drinks a drop. I don’t think he even smokes.

“Just now,” her voice dropped to conversational tone, “he’s doing a truly wonderful thing. He’s got the notion that our young people are growing soft.”

“They are, too,” Mr. Bowman grumbled.

“Tom Kennedy’s trying to bring back some of our glorious past, dog-teams, long, moonlit trails, the search for gold. He’s trying to interest the young people in all that,” added Mrs. Bowman.

“He’s doing it, too,” Bowman nodded his head. “Look at the dog race. They really think they’ll win,” he laughed good-naturedly. “Of course they won’t.

Smitty Valentine's going to beat 'em, by an hour or two. Good thing to have them try, though."

"You see," Mrs. Bowman explained, "we have an annual dog race. It ends with a big feast in honor of the winner. Your grandfather has gotten the young people interested in that race, made them think they can win. They've put their best dogs together into a team. A boy named Jodie Joleson is going to drive it. I surely wish they could win. But this man, Smitty Valentine, who is backed by all the pool halls and men's clubs in town, has won so many years hand running, that we've lost track."

"Belongs to the Sourdough Club," Bowman explained. "Sort of old timers' club."

"And now these young people have what they call the 'Fresh Dough Club' of young timers," Mrs. Bowman laughed.

"And now I think you may all come in and sit down at the table." It was their hostess who brought to an end this—to Florence—amazing revelation.

"So that is what he's like," she whispered to herself. "How strange! How wonderful! And yet—"

It was a sober Florence who, after sending word to her cousins regarding this, her proposed journey, climbed aboard the large gray monoplane. "This," she was thinking, "is to be my most exciting adventure. I wonder how it will end?" How indeed? Seldom does a girl go in search of her grandfather. And how her ideas of that grandfather had changed! She had always known, in a sketchy manner, the story of her grandfather's life. A big, boisterous, fun-loving youth, little more than a boy, he had loved and married a beautiful, frail girl from a proud well-to-do family. That girl became Florence's grandmother.

Tom Kennedy was not loved by his wife's parents. They made life hard for him. When at last life under his own roof became unbearable, he had found escape by joining the gold rush to Alaska.

Alaska brought more hardships, cold, hunger, and disappointment. And after that, months on the way, a letter reached him, saying that his wife was dead and that, without his consent, her parents had adopted his only child, a girl. That girl had been Florence's mother.

From that day, Tom Kennedy was lost to the outside world. “But Alaska,” Florence thought, with a tightening at the throat, “Alaska, it would seem, came to know and love him. And now—”

Ah, yes—and now. She had always thought of Tom Kennedy as a typical prospector, like Malcomb Dale, who had lured Bill from his ranch. And now here he was, not rich, but loved and respected. She was going to him. The large gray plane, drumming steadily onward, carried her over broad stretches of timber, frozen lakes, arms of the sea, on and on and on, toward Tom Kennedy, her grandfather. And how would he receive her?

The answer to this question came when, four days later, a little breathless, but quite determined, she stood at the door of a weather-beaten cabin, on the outskirts of Nome.

“Come in!” a large, hearty voice roared.

It was with uncertain movements that she lifted the iron latch, pushed the door open and stepped inside.

“I—I beg your pardon, Miss.” A tall man, with keen gray eyes that matched his well-trimmed beard, rose hastily to his feet. “I thought it was one of the boys. And it’s you, a stranger and a girl.”

“Not a stranger,” the girl’s voice was low with emotion. “I—I am Florence Huyler, your granddaughter.”

The effect on the old man was strange. Taking a step backward, he drew a hand across his face, then spoke as in a dream:

“My granddaughter? No! It cannot be. And yet, it could be so. I had a wife. She was beautiful.... I loved her.... She died.... All this was long ago. I could not go back. The call of gold got me, and—

“So you are my granddaughter,” his voice changed. The notion seemed unreal but pleasing to him. “My granddaughter! How strange!”

“They say,” Florence tried to smile, “that we look alike.”

“That so?” Tom Kennedy looked at her long and earnestly. “Big for a girl,” he

murmured. “You look strong as a man.”

“I am,” Florence admitted frankly.

At that, Tom Kennedy looked at himself in a glass by the window. “Yes,” his eyes brightened, “yes, we do look alike. Welcome, child! Welcome to your grandfather’s cabin.” Seizing her hand, he held it for a moment with a grip that hurt.

“One more member for that gang of young pirates that haunt this cabin of mine,” he laughed. “You must meet them all, meet them and get to know them. They’re a fine lot, my gang. First thing I know you’ll be their leader, I’m bound. You’re a Kennedy and that means a lot.”

“Yes,” Florence replied with a smile, “I am sure it means a very great deal.”

And so it was that Florence found her grandfather, and at once a whole new wonderful life opened up for her.

CHAPTER XI
THE FRESH-DOUGH CLUB

“Such a delicious odor!” Florence exclaimed. With the prompt reactions of buoyant youth, she made herself at home in her grandfather’s cabin. Now, being hungry, she began sniffing the air.

“Mulligan stew,” the old man explained. “It’s done to a turn. Never a better one made. Prime young reindeer meat, bacon, evaporated potatoes, fresh onions, a spoonful of dried eggs, a pound of red beans, pepper, salt, fresh seal oil. Guess that’s about all there is in it. Hungry?” he smiled down at her.

“I’m always hungry,” Florence smiled.

Taking a huge bowl from the cupboard in the corner, Tom Kennedy filled it to the brim. Into an equally huge cup was poured steaming black coffee. “We’re healthy up here,” he explained. “We can take it straight.”

“So can I,” Florence gulped down a burning draught.

“Um—um,” she breathed a moment later as she tasted the stew. “I can cook a little, but not like that.”

“It comes,” said the old man, his words slow and melodious, “comes with time. I’ve been in the North thirty-five years.” The expression on his face changed. His thoughts, Florence told herself, must be far away.

She tried to read those thoughts, to discover whether they had to do with his boyhood days and his frail, child-wife who had died long ago, or with gray mountains, long trails, whirling snow and the lost mine.

Her thoughts were suddenly broken in upon by a breezy figure who appeared to have been blown through the door by a gust of wind.

A ruddy-faced youth, he was, garbed in a blue drill parka that looked like a slip-over dress, corduroy trousers and sealskin boots.

“Hi, Pop!” he exclaimed, not seeing the girl. “Great stuff today. Did fifty miles an’ cut twenty minutes off the time. I—

“Hey, you! Stay out!” he shouted suddenly as a half dozen great gray-brown beasts came tumbling into the room. They struck the young man with such force that he was suddenly thrown into the corner where Florence sat.

“I—I beg pardon,” he stammered. “I didn’t know—”

“Jodie, meet my granddaughter, Florence Huyler.” Wrinkles of amusement appeared about Tom Kennedy’s eyes.

“Your—your granddaughter!” the young man’s eyes opened wide. “Why, Pop, we didn’t know you had a living relative!”

“Neither did I, son. Not until just now. She dropped down from the sky.

“Jodie, here,” Tom Kennedy turned to Florence, “is the uncrowned king of Alaskan dog-mushers.”

“Yeah,” Jodie drawled, “crown’s likely to get a trifle tarnished before I get to wear it.”

“Jodie Joleson,” there was a ring of enthusiasm in the girl’s voice. “I’ve heard of you.”

“Where?” he stared.

“Anchorage.”

“Way down there! How fame does travel,” he replied in mock seriousness.

“Tell me, Grandfather,” Florence faced about. “Did a girl ever win your dog race?”

“What? A girl?” the old man stared.

“Of course not,” Jodie answered for him.

“Why so certain?” Florence gave the young man a look.

“Well, you see—see,” he hesitated, “it’s a long race, hundred miles and back. How could she?”

“I—I was just wondering. You see, I’m new to the country,” Florence half apologized. There remained in her eyes, quite unobserved by her companions, a peculiar gleam that might mean almost anything.

The days that followed were the strangest, most thrilling of Florence Huyler’s young life. Because she was Tom Kennedy’s granddaughter, she was taken at once into the very heart of the young set of Nome. A bright, jolly, carefree, healthy crowd she found them to be. She might, had she so chosen, have risen at once to a place of leadership among them. She did not choose. A natural, friendly girl, she loved being a member of some jolly gang, but being their leader, ah! that was quite another matter. She was not ambitious in this way.

She might, had she wished it, have been wined and dined from morning to night, for, of all the sociable, good-time-loving people, the dwellers of Alaska belong at the top. This she did not choose. From time to time she joined in some quiet evening affair. For the most part, two subjects held the center of her every waking thought, her grandfather and the coming annual dog race.

On stormy days she enjoyed lying stretched out on a couch before the glowing fire, while Tom Kennedy in his low, musical voice that rumbled like a drum, told of his days on Arctic trails. Always and always she listened for the story that would, she knew, hold her spellbound, the story of his lost mine. Day after day passed and he made no mention of it. More than once she bit her lips to keep from suggesting it. Always her question remained unasked. She could wait.

On bright days she might have been seen trotting along after Jodie Joleson’s dog sled. At first the boy appeared to resent that. She could almost hear him say, “A girl! Sooner or later she’ll go too far, play out, then I’ll have to haul her home.”

To his vast astonishment and final utter admiration, he found that she did not tire.

Florence, as you will know if you have read about her, was far from a weakling. From a small child she had gloried in strength and health. No slender waist line acquired on a diet of pickles and nut sundaes for her. She gloried in all of life,

good things to eat, long nights of sleep, and now, most of all, long, long trails.

One day, when a storm was coming in from the northwest, Jodie deliberately took the trail that leads up the coast, then over the bitter wind-blown flats of Tissue River.

By the time they reached those flats, the whole narrow valley was a mad whirl of snow. Without a word to the girl, Jodie headed his dogs straight into the storm and shouted one word:

“Mush!”

Magnificent beasts that they were, they sprang into the harness. Their speed redoubled, they leaped forward.

Plop-plop-plop, went Jodie’s skin boots on the hard-packed snow. Fainter, yet unmistakable, came the girl’s trotting footsteps behind him.

The storm grew wilder. The team, striking a stretch of glare-ice, was blown straight across it to pile up in a heap on the other side. Without a word Jodie disentangled them. Then, turning to the girl, he said, “Cheek’s froze. Take off your mitten and thaw it out with your hand.”

“Thanks,” Florence smiled as best she could. “Yours too are frozen. If you don’t mind, I’ll do yours first.”

His hand went hastily to his cheek, then he chuckled, “O. K. You win.”

Five minutes more and they were again battling the storm.

For two full hours, with the wind tearing at their parkas and the frost biting their cheeks, they battled onward. Then, of a sudden, the dogs took a sharp turn, climbed a ridge, dropped down into a valley, and they were out of the storm.

“You—you’re a better man than I am, Gungadin!” Jodie panted.

“Do you really think I’m good?” there was a note of suppressed eagerness in the girl’s voice.

“Sure you are!” the boy exclaimed. “Of course you are. Why?”

“Oh! I was just thinking,” she evaded. “You—you know, everybody wants to be good at things,” she added rather lamely. “But look!” she exclaimed, “your face is frozen again!”

“So is yours. My turn for thawing out.” His mitten was off, his warm hand on her cheek.

And thus Florence won Jodie’s complete approval.

That night the girl learned the joyous comfort of a long-haired deer skin sleeping-bag in a road house bunk. She slept the sleep of the just while the storm roared on.

Next day, with the wind down and the sun creeping low above the jagged outline of snow-topped mountains, they journeyed slowly homeward, Florence, Jodie, and the racing team.

CHAPTER XII
HER GREAT DISCOVERY

Of all the girls in the Fresh-Dough Club, Florence liked Alene Bowman best. Alene was quiet and, for a girl of the North, very modest. She was greatly interested in the social events of the season and especially in the annual dog race.

“There’s one thing I’d like to ask you,” Florence said to her, the day after her return from that trip up the coast. “What do you think would happen if a girl entered the race?”

“What?” Alene stared for a space of ten seconds. “Why, nothing, I guess. This is the North, you know. You thinking of going in?”

“No-o,” Florence spoke slowly. “Of course, I wouldn’t go in against Jodie, unless—”

“Unless you felt sure he couldn’t win and that perhaps you could,” Alene suggested.

“Yes—yes, that’s just it!” the large girl exclaimed. “It means a great deal to you young folks, that race.”

“A terrible lot.”

“And if I should go in and win—”

“You’d be the girl of the hour. Then, why, we’d ride you in triumph on our shoulders.”

“Good, broad shoulders,” Florence smiled. “And you don’t think of me as an outsider?”

“Certainly not. Anyone related to Pop Kennedy just couldn’t be an outsider. Besides, you’re a member of the club, aren’t you?”

“Thanks—I—I just sort of wanted to know. I’ll be going.” Florence turned away.

“No. Wait. There’s something father told me last night. You pass it on to Jodie if I don’t see him first. Tell him to keep a good watch on his dogs. There are things they do, you know, dope them or something, that slows them up.”

“But that old-timer rival of his, Smitty, wouldn’t do that?” Florence was shocked.

“No. Not Smitty. He’s a real sport. Win fair or not at all. So are the others going in, Scot Jordan and Sinrock Charlie. They’ll play fair.”

“Then what—?”

“There are some foreigners, quite a lot of them, all through the North, Syrians, Russians, and Japs. They are gamblers by trade. They’re getting up books on the race. They’re gambling heavily on Smitty to win. And father says there’s nothing they won’t do.”

“All right, I’ll tell Jodie.”

“That,” Florence thought, as she made her way home, “is all the more reason why we should have another team in the field. But where is it to come from?” Where indeed? In these days when both passengers and freight are carried by airplanes, really fine dog teams are becoming all too rare in the North. This Florence had learned from Tom Kennedy’s own lips.

Strangely enough, as if an answer to a prayer, in the van of a storm, the very team blew into town that same afternoon. Florence first saw them as they came tumbling over a high snow bank at the outskirts of the city. The sled as well as its driver piled up with the dogs. When Florence had helped them to right themselves, she found herself staring in admiration at a beautiful Eskimo girl, garbed in a handsome fawn skin parka, and at the grandest team of gray Siberian wolfhounds she had ever seen.

“Your dogs?” she managed to ask.

“No—me,” the girl showed all her fine teeth in a smile. “My brother’s dogs. Il-ay-ok my brother.”

“You mean Mr. Il-ay-ok is your brother?” Like a flash Florence saw the little man dressed in white man’s clothes on the dock at Anchorage.

“Il-ay-ok my brother,” the girl nodded.

“And these are his dogs?”

“Yes! Sure! Sure! His dogs. You wan-to ride?”

“Yes—yes, I’d love to.”

When Florence had found what she wanted she was a fast worker. This girl At-a-tak, she learned, had driven in from Cape Prince of Wales. She would stay in Nome with friends until her brother returned by airplane from his journey. Yes, she would be pleased to loan her brother’s dog team to the big white girl until they were needed. How long would that be? She did not know.

Florence had learned from her friends at Nome that Il-ay-ok had gone on an important commission in the interest of his people. She knew, too, that it had to do with reindeer. The Bowmans had told her this much. They had assured her also that, though they were large herders of reindeer, they were entirely in sympathy with Il-ay-ok and his purposes.

“Those men who are trying to edge in on the reindeer business,” Mr. Bowman had said with a gesture of disgust, “are rank outsiders. They know nothing of native problems and care less. They will rob the people of their last reindeer if they can.”

Knowing all this, Florence, whose sympathy went out freely to all simple, kindly people, wished Mr. Il-ay-ok a successful conclusion of his mission and a speedy journey home. For all that, she could not help hoping that he might not arrive until after the race was over, for now, with this wonderful team at her command, she was resolved to spend many hours each day on the trail and, if occasion seemed to warrant it, to venture in where no girl had dared venture before.

Two hours later she was again at Alene Bowman’s door. “Don’t tell a soul!” she implored, after she had told how she had come into possession of the gray team.

“Not a single soul.”

“Not a single soul,” Alene echoed. “Cross my heart and hope to die.” And Alene could keep a secret.

Every day after that Florence, behind her superb team, went for a “ride.” Each time she purposely drove through a well-populated section of the city. Always she wore a heavy deer skin parka and remained as far as eyes could see her seated on her sled with her team trotting along at a leisurely pace.

All was changed when at last a hill had hidden her from view. Leaping from her sled, she threw off the heavy parka, drew on a thin calico one and a squirrel skin cap and, seizing the handles of the sled, screamed:

“Mush! You mush!” This shout acted on the dog team like an electric shock. They shot away with the speed of the wind.

They were wise, were these dogs. Not four days had passed when her shout was no longer needed. Once the last house had disappeared from sight, Gray Chief, her dog leader, began cocking his ears. The instant her costume change was complete, without a word from the young driver, he was away.

“We’ll win,” she hissed more than once through tight-shut teeth. “Win it we must.”

At times she found Jodie looking at her in a strange way. Did he suspect her purpose? Did he imagine she would enter the race against him if his chances were good? She was very fond of Jodie. Not for all the world would she offend him. But she would not tell him of her plans, at least not for the present.

“Grandfather,” she said once when the two were alone, “is there a time limit for entering the race?”

“Entries must be in at noon of the day before the race,” he replied.

“Good!” the word escaped unbidden from her lips. He gave her a strange look, but said never a word.

That same day he told her the story of his lost mine, told how he and his partner had worked their way back, back, back into the mountains, how, having found

traces of gold, they had built a cabin and how they had worked day after day until the strike came, when they found nuggets as large as marbles, a very few nuggets but promise of many more.

“That very night,” his voice dropped, “Joe was taken sick. It was serious. I made a sled and hauled him out. That was a battle. I froze, starved, and fought my way and,” his voice dropped, “and lost. Partner died. Never found the mine again.”

“Perhaps someone else found it,” she suggested.

“Nope,” there was a suggestion of mystery in his voice. “We hid it. Joe and I hid that mine.”

After that day, more than ever before, the girl wanted to go in search of that mine. Go where? Ah! that was the question.

The answer came two days later and in a rather strange manner. A young scientist, a member of the Geological Survey, showed her a series of enlarged photographs taken from the air.

“They cover hundreds of square miles back there in the great unknown,” he explained. “See! Rivers, lakes, tundra, mountains, everything.”

“Everything!” the girl had been struck with an idea. “Loan them to me for an hour.”

“Right,” the young man agreed. “Two hours if you like.”

Fifteen minutes later she tore into Tom Kennedy’s cabin acting like a mad person. Pushing a table into the kitchen, throwing chairs on the bed in the small back room, she at last cleared the living room floor. Then, while her grandfather stared she thumb-tacked sheet after sheet of paper to the floor until there was no longer room to stand.

“There,” she panted. “There it all is, mountains, lakes, rivers, tundra, everything. Here is Nome,” she pointed. “There is Sawtooth Mountain. Now, where was your mine?”

For a full quarter hour, as the tin clock in the corner ticked the minutes away, the gray-haired prospector’s eyes moved back and forth across that map, then, with a

sudden gasp, he exclaimed:

“There it is! Right there. Well up on the middle fork of that river. I’d swear to it if it was the last word I ever said. Girl, you’re a wonder!” Suddenly he threw his long arms about her and kissed her on the cheek.

“Soon as that race is over we’re off,” he shouted, fairly beside himself with joy.

“Yes,” she agreed, “the race and then the long, long trail. Mountains, rivers, sunshine, storms, camp beneath a rocky ledge or in the midst of dark spruce trees. On and on, and then—”

“The mine,” he murmured. There was new fire in his fine old eyes.

CHAPTER XIII
A BRIGHT NEW DREAM

In the meantime, life was not dull on “Rainbow Farm,” as Mary had lovingly named their little claim in the happy Matamuska valley. As winter came blowing in from the north, some settlers, discouraged by the too frank breezes that swept through their green log cabins, sold out and sailed for home. From these Mark purchased two fine flocks of chickens. These called for a snug log cabin chicken house, more work, and added hopes for the future.

Every one settled down to the routine of winter’s work, all but Madam Chicaski. She did the most unusual things and obtained the most astonishing results. Having polished and oiled her large pile of rusty traps, she one day threw them, a full hundred pounds, over her ample back, then disappeared over the nearest hill. She remained away until long after dark. Mary was beginning to worry about her when, all bent over with fatigue, but smiling as ever, she appeared empty-handed at the door.

After consuming a prodigious amount of cornmeal mush, she sat dreaming by the fire.

“Renewing her youth,” Mary whispered.

Mark nodded and smiled.

What was their surprise when three days later she appeared with five foxes, four minks and a dozen muskrats, all prime furs.

“For you a good long coat,” she held the muskrat skins before Mary’s eyes. “Bye and bye many more.

“And for you perhaps a cape,” she held up the mink skins as she nodded to Mrs. Hughes. “Who knows? The minks, they are harder to catch.”

“And the fox skins?” Mark asked.

“To buy more traps, always more traps,” was the big woman’s enthusiastic response.

“There is money in it,” Mark said to Dave McQueen next day.

“Yes, if she’ll show us the tricks,” Dave agreed.

“She will,” Mark declared. And she did. As Mark followed her about he saw how she cut snow thin as cardboard for concealing the traps, how she scattered drops of oil about to supply a scent leading to the traps, how she discovered a mink’s run at a river’s brink, and many other little secrets of the trapping world.

Soon both Mark and Dave were full-fledged trappers with trap lines running away and away into the hills.

Mary too was contributing her bit to the family’s wealth. The number of Speed Samson’s hunting trips with his airplane increased. He had come to relish the food served at Rainbow Farm. Knowing that his clients would enjoy it as well, and at the same time be charmed by the life there, he made a practice of dropping down upon their small lake. More often than not he brought his own supply of meat. A hunk of venison, a loin of a young moose, a leg of wild sheep, even brown bear steak went into pot or roasting pan to reappear as the delicious *piece de resistance* of a bountiful meal. His clients got in the way of leaving a folded bank note beneath each plate. In this way Mary began to accumulate quite a considerable little hoard.

At last, in a spending mood, she took the train at Palmer and rode all the way to Anchorage. There she made a surprising and, to her, rather disturbing discovery.

Having mailed a letter, she stood looking over the low railing into the rear of the postoffice when her eye was caught by a pile of second-class mail. It was in sacks, but the half-open sacks presented a strange picture. Out of one a beautiful doll appeared to be struggling. From a second a toy train, apparently at full speed, had been arrested in midtrack, while from another cautiously peeped a woolly teddybear.

Leaning forward, Mary read the address on one sack. “Wales, Alaska. Where is that?”

“Cape Prince of Wales, on Bering Straits above Nome,” said the postmaster.

“Way up there!” Mary was surprised. “Christmas presents. Will they get there in time?”

“In time for the 4th of July,” was the reply. “Some teacher up there asked friends to contribute to his tree for Eskimo children. These sacks arrived too late for the last boat. Cost a small fortune to send them by air mail, so here they stay.”

“Oh, that—” Mary exclaimed, “that’s too bad. Think what all those presents would mean to the cute little Eskimo children!”

“Oh, sure, but that’s what you get in the North.” The postmaster dismissed the matter at that. But for Mary, forgetting the appealing doll, the rushing train that did not rush, and the peeping bear, was not so easy.

“If only Florence had known they were here!” she thought as she turned away. “Perhaps they had not yet arrived. Anyway—”

Anyway what? She did not exactly know. She wished that she might own an airplane all her own and go where she chose in this great white world of the North. This, she knew, was only a mad dream, so taking the train for home, she settled down to the business of feeding chickens, gathering eggs, and assisting in the preparation of delicious meals.

And then one bright, clear day something very strange happened. In a cutter drawn by two prancing horses, Mr. Il-ay-ok, the Eskimo, appeared at their door.

“Excuse, please,” the little man bowed low. “Mr. Speed Samson, he comes to this place very soon. Is it not so?”

“I—I don’t know,” replied Mary.

“It is so. I am convinced. With your kindness I shall wait. It is important, so important to my people.” The little man bowed once more.

“You are welcome to stay as long as you like,” was Mary’s welcome.

The driver was dismissed. Mr. Il-ay-ok entered. Mary experienced a cold shudder as she thought, “Peter Loome may follow on his trail.” But she

introduced the little man to her mother and did all in her power to make him feel at home.

When, true to Il-ay-ok's prophecy, Speed came zooming in from the sky, the little Eskimo, nearly bursting out the door in his haste, went racing down to the landing.

"Excuse, please," he exclaimed as Speed stepped from the plane. "You must take me to Nome. I must go soon, perhaps at once. You shall take me to Nome."

"Who says that?" the aviator grinned.

"I say it. I, Mr. Il-ay-ok."

"Well," Speed drawled, "can't do it."

"You must!" sudden distress and rigid determination shone in the little man's eyes.

"I must not," replied Speed. There was a note of finality in his voice. "This is the hunting season. I have customers coming. I cannot wire them not to come then go zooming off on some wild goose chase to Nome. This is my harvest. How much money you got?" he asked suddenly.

"Unfortunately, no money," Mr. Il-ay-ok's face fell. "But you shall be paid," he was up and at it again. "My people they have fox skins, very fine fox skins, red, white, cross fox, silver gray fox. You shall have many fox skins. You shall sell them for much money."

"I'm afraid that won't do." Speed's face sobered. In the little man's face he had read sincere distress. Speed was a kindly soul. "It is truly impossible for me to give up my work now. Perhaps in three or four weeks—"

"Ah, yes!" the little man's voice rose shrill and eager. "Before January the first?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Oh!" Mary breathed, suddenly enchanted with a bright idea. "Before Christmas, you must!"

“What? You must go too?” Speed cried, banteringly.

“I—I might,” the girl could scarcely believe her voice, it was the first time she had ever thought of it. “Anyway,” she added hurriedly to conceal her embarrassment, “you are to be Santa Claus to a hundred Eskimo children.”

“If I am Santa Claus,” said Speed, seizing her hand, “you shall be little Miss Santa Claus. I don’t know what it is all about, but here, shake on it.” He gave her hand a hearty squeeze.

Il-ay-ok rode back to Anchorage in Speed’s plane and there, for a time, the matter rested.

CHAPTER XIV
“THEY ARE OFF”

In Nome each twenty-four hours that passed saw the great race just one day nearer. Each day the excitement over this event increased. The prize this year was large. Men of means had contributed generously. Though thought of winning for the honor of the “Fresh-Dough Club” was ever uppermost in Jodie’s mind, and in Florence’s when she indulged in strange day-dreams, the prize was not entirely forgotten. Jodie had been let in on the secret of the lost mine. Once the race was won, or lost, it was planned that they should be away at once on their search for that mine. And the prize money would go far toward providing them with the very necessary grub-stake.

Little wonder then that, while keeping one eye on her own gray team—just in case something happened—Florence always had the other turned upon Jodie’s fine dogs.

The crack of the starter’s gun was only three days away when, as Jodie came in from his daily practice run, Florence met him on the street. “What’s the matter with old Sparks?” she asked, nodding at the right hand wheel dog. “He doesn’t seem quite up to himself.”

“Been lagging all day,” Jodie’s brow wrinkled. “Off his feed a little, I guess. I’ll cut him out tomorrow. He’ll be O. K. after that.”

“Jodie,” the girl’s tone was low, serious, “do you watch your dogs?”

“Sure thing I do.” He stared at her.

“Jodie, there’s talk of gambling going on among those foreigners, you know. They might—”

“I know,” Jodie replied wearily. “They’ll not get to my dogs. The kennel is right

against my bunk. Besides, from now on, Az-az-ruk, a half-breed, is going to watch them at night."

"I'm glad. Good-bye, Jodie." The girl was away.

That night Florence sat a long time by the fire. She was thinking hard. What Jodie had told her had not entirely reassured her. One of his dogs did not appear to be right for the race. What if another and perhaps another began to wear down under the strain.

"We'd lose," she whispered.

"But suppose I enter the race with the grays?" A thrill ran up her spine. How she'd love it. Always her sturdy body had cried out for action. She had swum a swift flowing mile-wide river on a dare. She had climbed mountains alone. She had done all manner of wild things on trapeze and ropes, just for the thrill of it. And now this race! All else seemed to pale into insignificance.

"And yet," she thought, "would it be fair to Jodie?"

One more day passed, then another. It was the forenoon of the day before the coming of the great event. Only a few hours were left for entering the race. Yesterday she had driven her gray streaks over fifty miles of tough trails. How magnificently they had performed! With such a team, who could stay out? And yet—

Fifteen minutes later her mind was made up. Jodie passed her. He was off for a short spin. Short as had been her experience at driving and judging dogs, she knew at a glance that all was not well. Four of his dogs were now imitating the actions of a very weary rag doll. Their heads hung low. Their tails drooped. Each forward sprint called for a great effort.

"That half-breed must have slept on his watch," her eyes narrowed.

When Jodie came trotting back two hours later, she met him in the street.

"Whoa! Whoa, there!" he shouted at his dogs. "What's on your mind?" The smile that he gave the girl was an uncertain one.

Florence's heart was in her throat. Would he hate her now? "Jodie," she replied

soberly, “I’m in the race with the grays. I—I just had to do it!”

“Good!” seizing her hand, he gripped it until it hurt. “I hoped you’d enter. It’s a tough grind all that way and back, so I didn’t want to urge you. But you—you’ll make it, and you’ll win.”

“No, Jodie,” her voice was deep and low, “I’ll only win if I see you can’t.”

“That,” he swallowed hard, “that’s sporting of you, but you—you can’t do that. You go in to win. Forget me. Forget everything. Go after those gray wolves and make them do their best, start to finish. And here—here’s luck to the best man!

“All right, Ginger,” his voice dropped. “Mush along you!” He trotted away behind his team.

“And this,” Florence murmured, “this is the North. No wonder they call it ‘God’s country.’”

“You go to sleep, girl,” Tom Kennedy said to her at nine that night. “I’ll stay up till morning. You never can tell what’s going to happen in the wee small hours.

“God made a mistake,” his keen gray eyes took her in—squirrel skin cap, bright orange mackinaw, corduroy knickers and all, “you should have been a boy.”

“A girl can do what any boy can, if she’s strong and keeps herself fit,” she flashed back at him.

“No girl’s ever run in the great race before,” he reminded her.

“That’s what makes it so fascinating. Who wants to be forever doing what others do?”

“You’ll be an honor to your old granddad. I—I’m glad you came,” his voice was husky.

“I hoped you would be,” she replied simply.

All that night, with lights out and with the inner door ajar, Tom Kennedy sat by the window that overlooked the distant, moonlit hills and the dog kennels close

at hand. Once Florence stirred in her sleep, then suddenly sat up. What was it? Had she heard a shot? She did hear the door softly closed, she was sure of that.

“What was it, grandfather?” she asked sleepily.

“Thought I saw a skunk. Can’t be sure. He’s gone now, went mighty fast.”

“Skunks,” she thought dreamily, “do they have skunks in Alaska?” What did it matter? Once more she was asleep.

And then the great day dawned.

All the little city’s population was out to see them start. A picturesque throng it was. Indians, Eskimos, trappers, traders, gold hunters, shop keepers, adventurers, they were all there.

The five contestants drew for places. The teams would start one hour apart. Many hours would pass before their return. When they began straggling back, the throng would be there again. Meanwhile, snug and warm in their cabins, they would with shouts of joy or howls of disappointment listen to shortwave radio accounts of the race.

Jodie drew first place. Smitty Valentine, hero of many another race and favorite of old-timers, drew second, Florence was third, and the two other sourdough contenders drew up the rear.

With a wild round of applause, Jodie was away in a cloud of fine driving snow.

For an hour the crowd lingered. Then, at the crack of a pistol, with a shout and a flourish of the whip, Smitty was away. Then such a shout! “Smitty! Smitty! Go, Smitty! Go!”

Florence swallowed hard. The popularity of this man had been honestly won. Tom Kennedy had said he was a real old-timer, and Tom knew. And yet, “Time marches on. Youth must be served. Unless youth is given a place in the sun, there can be no progress.” These words of a truly great man rang in her ears. They must win. It was Jodie or she. Which should it be?

The crowd did not linger to see her off. Oh, yes, the younger crowd, her gang, the tried and true, would stick. As for the others, who could blame them? There

was a bitter cold wind from the west. And who was she? Only a girl from somewhere or other. What place had a girl in such a race? Hundred miles! What, indeed! Probably lose her team in some wild storm, they may have been thinking. At thought of this, she set her teeth and clenched her fists. She would show them. Girl or no girl, they should see.

A thin cheer arose from the faithful few when at last the pistol sounded out the hour and with a quiet “All right,” to her leader, she headed straight out over the long, long trail.

CHAPTER XV
THE PHANTOM LEADER

For nine long hours, save for three brief pauses to rest her dogs and catch some light refreshments for herself, Florence followed the long, winding trail that led away and away one hundred miles into the great beyond. Now and then a thrill coursed through her being. Other than this there was no sign that this was a race, and not just one more joy ride. True, as she mounted the crest of a steep ridge, she did catch a fleeting glimpse of a speeding dog team. Was it her nearest opponent, Smitty Valentine? There was no way to tell. He had left an hour before her. Should she reach the finish just fifty-nine minutes behind him, the race was hers. If not—well, Jodie was still further ahead, perhaps the race was to be his. Who could tell?

Plop-plop-plop went her feet on the snow. Her light basket sled was empty, yet she never rode—her fleet gray hounds must have every advantage. Plop-plop-plop on the hard-packed snow. Here a covey of white ptarmigan rose fluttering from the trail, there a sly white wolf mounted a ridge to stare after her, here a column of smoke rose above the tree tops and there two little brown men, their dog-team drawn off the trail, watched in silence as she passed. What a weird, wild world was this!

Strangely enough, as she reached the last trail-house prepared for the required twenty minute rest before starting back over the trail, she learned that three racers—Jodie, Smitty, and herself—were running neck and neck.

“Not a half mile between them,” the radio announcer droned. “The two last teams driven by Scot Jordan and Sinrock Charlie now lag behind.

“Surprise has been expressed in many quarters,” he droned on. “Surprise at the endurance of the girl racer, Florence Huyler.”

So she had them surprised? Florence smiled grimly as she gulped down a large mug of steaming coffee. “Surprised! Huh!” she said aloud. Then to the trail-house keeper’s wife, “Call me, please, when the time is up. I’m going to sleep.” She threw herself down upon a couch and was at once fast asleep.

In her sleep she dreamed—odd dream it was, too. In it she saw the huge Madam Chicaski placing seven candlesticks on the mantel at Rainbow Farm. Gold they must have been, for they shone like the sun. Then she saw the woman pouring something out of a huge copper kettle.

“Gold,” she whispered in her dream. “Gold coins, hundreds and hundreds of them.”

These were all poured on the table, some rolling on the floor. Then a little, dark man, Mr. Il-ay-ok, approached the table and began gathering them up. “I need them for my people,” was all he said.

Florence awoke with a start. The dream was at an end. The trail-house matron was shaking her.

“Time is up.”

One minute more and the girl was on her way back. But that dream, it lingered in the back of her mind. What did it mean? Probably nothing. Perhaps this, that life’s adventures are never at an end, that if she won this race, it was to be not an end but a beginning of other things. There was Madam Chicaski and her supposed treasure, Mr. Il-ay-ok and his people, and her grandfather’s mine. “Life,” she thought, “goes on and on and, like one’s shadow, adventure goes before it.”

But now once again she thought only of the race. Once again, as in a dream, the long, white trail glided on beneath her weary feet.

The next stop, twenty miles along the homeward trek, brought bad news—Jodie was falling behind, already he had lost twenty minutes.

“It’s his dogs,” Florence explained to the sympathizing trail-house keeper. “They’re not right.”

“Anything happens in dis race,” encouraged her host, “yust anyting at all. You

yust keep pushin' dem sled handles."

"I'll keep pushing," she smiled. She was thinking not of herself but of Jodie. How was it all to end?

Hours later she found herself approaching "Twenty-Mile House," the last stop before the home stretch. Jodie was now quite definitely out of the race. But—she squared her shoulders at the thought—Smitty Valentine, her closest opponent, was twenty minutes behind her. A slim lead this, but if only she could hold it. If —

Of a sudden, Gray Chief, her leader, gave a yelp of pain, then began hopping along on three feet. Time after time the brave fellow put that foot to the snow, only to lift it again.

In consternation she stopped the dogs to race ahead and examine that foot.

"Not a scratch," she murmured. "Just one of those things that happen to a dog in a race." Drawing her sheath knife, she cut the leader's draw rope, then, lifting him in her arms, carried him back to deposit him on the sled. He whined piteously, but, with almost human wisdom, appeared to know that for the time at least, he was through.

"Must bring you all in," the girl spoke to the dogs, there were tears in her voice. "Who could be cruel enough to leave you behind on the frozen trail?"

At Twenty-Mile House, with sinking heart, she learned that already her slim lead was lost.

"Smitty Valentine and Florence Huyler running neck and neck," the announcer droned. "Betting is four to one on Smitty."

"Oh, it is!" the girl's face flushed. Gladly she would have plunged at once into the race, but rules forbade—twenty minutes for every racer at every rest spot, those were the orders. Refusing an offer of refreshments, she threw herself on a cot in the corner and was at once lost to the world.

This time she did not dream. And yet, when she was awakened, she imagined she was dreaming, for there above her was a familiar face, At-a-tak, the Eskimo girl.

“I go with you last mile. Say I could, those men. I not touch you, not touch sled, not touch dog, just go, say that, those men.”

Florence found herself strangely cheered by this news. If this last long mile were to be run in misery, she would at least have company.

Scarcely were they on their way than the Eskimo girl began shouting strange guttural commands to the team. This appeared to help. Florence was cheered. The next thing At-a-tak did was strange. Dragging Gray Chief from the sled, she said, “All right, you go. I come. I bring him.” Reluctantly Florence drove on.

But now new trouble appeared on the horizon. A storm was coming. Sifting fine snow at her feet, it rose to her knees, her waist, her shoulders, then began cutting at her cheeks.

To her vast surprise, out of this murk of snow-fog from behind her came a girl and a dog—At-a-tak and Gray Chief. And, wonder of wonders, Gray Chief was trotting on all fours. What had the native girl done to him? No time to ask. Some native trick of magic. She saw the leader take his place at the front, then felt the sled lurch forward.

The grim battle went on. The storm increased. Eyes half blinded by snow, the brave dogs forged forward into a day that was all but night.

Would they win? Could they? No more reports now. The end of the trail lay straight ahead. The advantage was all with Smitty. He would be through when she was still an hour from the goal. How dared she hope? And yet she did dare.

“Much depends on this race,” she murmured.

“Much,” At-a-tak echoed hoarsely at her side.

And then came one more surprising burst of speed. “Good old Gray Chief!” she murmured. “Go! Go! Go! Go, Gray Chief!”

“Look!” In spite of rules, At-a-tak gripped her arm as they ran. “Look! It is the Phantom Leader. Now you win! It is good! Nagoo-va-ruk-tuk.”

Straining her eyes, Florence caught a glimpse of something white before her on the trail. Was it wolf, dog, or phantom? She could not tell, nor did she care,

enough that, for the moment at least, her speed had been increased.

“It can’t last,” she murmured to herself. “It will disappear, that beast, or phantom of the storm. Or, perhaps he will lead us astray.”

To her surprise and great joy, it did last. Ever and anon, as the wild drive of the snow faded, she caught sight of that drifting spot of white. Now it was there and now gone, but for Gray Chief and his band it was always there and always, in some superhuman way, it inspired them to fresh endeavor.

Only at the crest of the last ridge did the “phantom” vanish. And then it was but a short mile, all down hill, to the last stake, to defeat or victory.

“Than—thank God for the Phantom Leader,” she exclaimed as, leaping on her sled and using one foot for a brake, she went gliding down, down, down—to what? She would soon know.

As she came into view, she heard their wild scream from half a mile away. “Our gang,” her throat tightened. They would be loyal. Win or lose, she would receive a round of cheers. Good old Arctic gang! How good they had been to take her in!

Three minutes more and she caught the refrain of their wild chant:

“You win! You win! We win! We win! Sourdough? No! No! No! Fresh-Dough! Fresh-Dough! We win! We win!”

There could be no doubting the truth of this chant. She read it in their faces when, as she shot across the line, they seized her, tossed her upon a broad expanse of dry walrus skin, then lifting her high, began bearing her away in triumph.

At the clubroom door they paused. Then, in a spirit of fun, they allowed the skin to sag. Two score hands gave a quick yank and the heroine of the hour rose in air.

This was not new to Florence. “Yea!” she shouted. “Come on! Let’s go!” Balancing herself in the center of this strange blanket, she stood erect and, with the next lusty pull, shot skyward like a rocket.

Three times she sought the stars. Three times she scanned that throng for a face. She was looking for Jodie. He was not there.

“Come on in,” they shouted in a chorus. “We’ll celebrate!”

“No,” she shook her head. “Please. Not tonight. I’m dead. Tomorrow night we’ll whoop it up.”

“All right! All right!” they screamed. “Big brass band and all. Tomorrow night.”

At that, seizing proud Tom Kennedy’s arm, she marched away.

“Grandfather,” she whispered, “where’s Jodie? Didn’t he get in?”

“Sure! Oh, sure!” the old man replied. “Of course, he lost. Three dogs went wrong, but he came in, all the way.

“When he got to the cabin,” he laughed, “he just tumbled on the cot and fell asleep. Before that, though, he said, ‘Be sure to wake me up when she comes in,’ meaning you. But, you know, I didn’t have the heart to wake him. He’s still fast asleep.”

This last was not quite true, at least they found Jodie standing just inside the door when they arrived.

“Congratulations!” he held out a hand.

“Jodie, I’m sorry you couldn’t win,” the girl’s voice was low.

“I know,” he stood silent for an instant, then a mischievous look stole into his eyes.

“Well, anyway,” he said, “*we* won the race. Just the way a man and his wife killed the bear. Ever hear of that?”

“No.”

“Sit down and I’ll tell you.” Florence sat down. “You see,” said Jodie, “there was a man, his wife and two children in a shack when a great big bear entered. The man went to the rafters. The woman, being hampered by children clinging to her

skirts, stayed on the floor. Seizing an axe, she killed the bear. Whereupon the man climbed down shouting, ‘Mary! Mary! We killed the bear!’

“And now,” he added soberly, “now we’ve won the race, what are we to do about it?”

“Put half the prize money in the bank for Mr. Il-ay-ok, spend the rest for grub, a new rifle or two and some ammunition, then go in search of Grandfather’s lost mine,” she panted all in one breath.

“Sounds great!” the boy exclaimed. “Do I go along?”

“Certainly. We’ll be generous,” the girl laughed. “We’ll let you do nearly all the digging.”

“Mulligan’s on,” said Tom Kennedy, dragging up a chair. “What do you say?”

“Grand!” Florence was ready for just that. Never before had she been so hungry and so sleepy all in one.

“Jodie,” she said with the sudden start of one who had recalled something very unusual. “What about this Phantom Leader?”

“Why, have you seen him?” Jodie grinned.

“Sure—sure I’ve seen him, at least that’s what At-a-tak called him. ‘The Phantom Leader.’ And Jodie,” her tone was serious, “that’s why I won the race. He ran before us, miles and miles.”

“Never heard of such a thing,” Jodie stared. “Probably a white wolf daring your dogs to get him, or perhaps a wandering dog.

“But the Phantom Leader, h-m-m—that’s a grand little Eskimo legend. This Phantom is a real ghost hound who appears to help people out of trouble. An Eskimo woman is lost in a storm, he appears to lead her home. A hunter lost in the drifting floes, starving and freezing, sees the Phantom Leader, follows him and finds land. You know, regular thing, stuff dreams are made of.”

“All the same,” said Florence, resuming her meal, “I hope to meet the Phantom again. He brought us rare good luck.”

Giving herself over to the business of eating, she consumed a vast amount of mulligan stew and a great heap of hot biscuits. After that she dragged her reluctant feet to her cubby-hole of a bedroom and, creeping between blankets, slept the clock around.

CHAPTER XVI
THE GOLDEN QUEST

Florence was seated at the table the next day doing justice to a late afternoon breakfast of hot cakes and coffee when Jodie arrived.

“Plans have been changed,” he gave her a rare smile. “No whoopee, but a grand ball. That’s what it’s going to be. Full dress affair.”

“Full dress?” the girl’s lips parted in a gasp of surprise. Then with a sigh, “Oh, well,” she opened the draft in the small cook stove and set the flatirons on.

A half hour later she stood before Jodie garbed in the only silk dress she had with her, a full-length affair of midnight blue, trimmed in ermine.

“Keen!” was the boy’s comment. “Needs just one northern touch. You wait,” he burst through the door and was gone.

Fifteen minutes later he reappeared with a soft, bulky package under his arm.

“Here you are.” With one swift movement he cast away the paper wrapping and threw a gorgeous white fox fur about her neck. “And there you are,” he stood back admiringly. “Queen of the ball!”

“Jodie! Is it mine?” her eyes shone.

“Sure ’nuff. Present from the gang. Great stuff, I’d say—dog-musher one day, queen of the ball the next. Nothing like contrast in this jolly old world of ours.”

Jodie was not wrong. The winter nights are long in Alaska, but not too long for a jolly good time. A waxed floor, a peppy ten-piece orchestra, including two Eskimo drummers, a joyous company and sixteen hours of darkness, who could ask for more? Florence did not ask. She made the most of every fleeting hour.

For, she thought in one sober moment, before another forty-eight hours have flown, we'll be on the trail once more.

And so they were, off on the long trek that, they hoped, would bring them to the lost gold mine and to the end of good old Tom Kennedy's lifelong dream.

They trailed away into the cold, gray dawn, two teams and four people—Tom Kennedy, Florence, Jodie, and At-a-tak. Not only had the Eskimo girl gladly loaned the gray team for the occasion, but she had offered to accompany them as seamstress for their native clothing.

Not a word was said as the city faded into the distance and blue-gray hills loomed ahead. They were off on the great quest, man's age-long search for gold.

They had been trotting along behind their sleds for some ten miles when, as it will on Arctic trails, the wind began pelting them with hard particles of snow. This time, however, that wind was with them.

"Ah," Jodie breathed joyously, "twenty below zero and the wind at our backs! What time we shall make!"

"But look at the whirl of that snow!" Florence was alarmed. "We'll lose the trail."

"No fear," Tom Kennedy assured her. "The first few days of trail are like a paved road to an oldtimer. It's the end that counts. We—"

"Look!" Florence broke in, pointing away before them. "The Phantom Leader."

"Yes! Yes!" At-a-tak echoed. "The Phantom Leader."

"There *is* something," Jodie agreed. "Something white. It moves. Now it is gone."

"No! No! There it is," Florence's voice was eager. "Jodie! Grandfather! The Phantom Leader! That means good luck."

"I hope so," Jodie was straining his eyes for a better look. "There! See! He has stopped."

“Or—or fallen,” Florence was ready to go racing on ahead of the team. Jodie held her back.

“You never can tell,” he counselled.

“There! There! He *is* gone!” the girl cried a moment later.

“Over a ridge. We’ll see him again,” Tom Kennedy explained.

Indeed they did see him again and so close that Florence imagined herself looking at a pair of eyes burning their way out of a field of white.

“Oh! Ah!” she breathed.

“If that’s a dog,” Jodie exclaimed in a hoarse whisper, “he’s the whitest one I’ve ever seen.”

“There! He’s down!” Florence’s voice was tense with emotion. “Poor fellow! He must be hurt!”

“Who ever heard of a ghost being hurt?” Jodie laughed.

“There—there he goes!”

“This can’t last forever,” Jodie cracked a whip. His team sped on.

For a full half mile they burned up the trail, then with a suddenness that was startling, they all piled up in a heap at the back side of a snow bank. And there lying at Florence’s feet was one of the most piteous sights the girl’s eyes had rested upon: a collie dog, white as snow and so emaciated with hunger that every bone could be counted. He was whining piteously.

“Poor thing,” she murmured as she dug into her pack for cooked reindeer meat. “Poor old Phantom Leader!”

“Well, I’m dumbed!” was all Jodie could say. Tom Kennedy said nothing at all. At-a-tak stared as one must stare when, for the first time, he sees a ghost within his reach.

“Where did he come from?” Florence asked as the dog voiced thanks for the

food offered him.

“Not from Nome,” said Kennedy. “No such dog there.”

“Some reindeer herder’s dog, or a miner’s, like Jack London’s Buck in the *Call of the Wild*,” said Jodie. “Find his story and you may learn of tragedy.”

No time now for such musings. The long trail lay ahead.

“We’ll take him along for luck,” said Florence. What luck? How could she know now?

“We’ll have to, of course,” they all agreed. “No true Alaskan ever leaves a starving dog on the trail.”

So the “Phantom Leader” was stowed away on top of the canvas packing on Jodie’s sled, and the little caravan once more moved on into the great unknown.

Long days followed, days of pushing forward along untracked rivers and over low mountains where no man lived, and no living creature moved save the fox, the wolf, and the snowshoe rabbit. Nights there were when the sky was like a blue sea filled with the lights of a thousand ships. An Arctic gale came sweeping down upon them. Blotting out the landscape, it drove them into camp. For two days and nights with their little sheet-iron stove beating back the frost, they lay on their sleeping bags listening to the beat of snow against their tent.

Their food supply dwindled. No wild caribou had been seen, but joy suddenly filled their hearts when at last they came to the spot where the river they followed forked.

“That,” Tom Kennedy exulted, “is the fork. Up this stream we must go.”

Did they have faith in his judgment? How could they doubt it? Yet Florence thought of their meager food supply and shuddered.

“Jodie and I will go out to look for game,” said Tom Kennedy.

“Sure. We’ll have some great luck,” Jodie agreed.

“I’ll set up camp and cut some wood.” Florence was no weakling. She could play a man’s part.

As for At-a-tak, she wandered away in search of snowshoe rabbits’ tracks. More than once her cunningly set snares had provided their pot with a delicious stew.

It was after Florence had set up camp and while the others were still away that she began hearing puzzling sounds. Coming from the distance, they sounded like the crackle of a wood fire. But there was no fire.

“What is it?” she asked of the white collie, the “Phantom Leader,” who lay on the snow close beside her. Well fed and cared for now, the dog had regained his strength. He had become a prime favorite with all. But oh! how he could eat! And in the harness he was just no good at all. Neither his nature nor his training fitted him for this.

“Come on, Phantom,” the girl murmured. “Earn your dinner. Tell me what those sounds are.”

For answer the dog rose to his haunches and growled. His sharp nose pointed straight down the trail over which they had come. Each moment the faint clatter increased in volume. At the same time a burst of wind swept up the valley and a swirl of fine particles cut at the girl’s cheek.

“Oh, dear! Another storm!” Still she waited and listened.

“Phantom! What is it, you—” Suddenly she broke short off. As her whisper ceased, her lips parted, her eyes bulged in astonishment, for at that instant from behind a clump of low spruce trees a head appeared. The head, long and white with small mottled brown spots, carried a pair of massive antlers. The creature stood staring at them, apparently quite unafraid.

“A—a caribou!” she whispered. “Food, plenty of food for dogs and men. All the rifles gone, too. And yet—”

The creature was beautiful. If a rifle were in her hands could she have killed it? She did not know.

Then like a flash the truth came to her, this was not a caribou but a reindeer, a domestic reindeer. Caribou are brown. Only reindeer are white.

“And there are others,” she said to the dog, “many more. Listen!” As she stood there in silence there came again that confused crack-cracking. That, she realized, was many reindeer crack-cracking their hoofs as they trotted over the snow.

“Reindeer,” she whispered in awed excitement, “many reindeer here, two hundred miles from the nearest range. Something wrong somewhere, that’s sure!”

Truly here was a situation. Her companions were gone. Here was a problem to be solved.

“They might be back any time,” she told herself, “but they may not come before the storm breaks.” Something seemed to tell her that here was a matter that needed looking into. Had this herd wandered away, been stampeded by wolves, or—her heart skipped a beat—had some northern outlaws driven the reindeer into the wilds that they might live upon them and perhaps later sell the unmarked yearlings?

“It might be Eskimo,” she thought. Her grandfather had told how the deer had at one time belonged to the Government and to the Eskimo, and how white men had gained control of great herds, how some of the Eskimo, feeling themselves defeated, had turned bitter and at one time or another killed deer that did not belong to them.

“It might be dangerous to go and see what it’s all about,” she told herself. “Might—”

A flash of light had caught her eye, a gleam from the white reindeer’s ear. “A marker,” she exclaimed. “John Bowman’s marker! Ah, that’s different!” She had seen Bowman’s deer at Nome. “Come on, Phantom!” she called to the dog. “We’ll have to look into this.”

Inspired by this call to service, Florence climbed up the slope. Then, crouching low that she might not startle the reindeer, she followed back along the trail.

Behind her, sticking close to her heels, was the “Phantom Leader.”

“Good old Phantom,” she murmured. The dog let out an all but inaudible yap-yap.

A biting breath of air struck her cheek. Snow rattled against her parka. The storm was on its way.

Creeping down the slope, she peered through the branches. “Reindeer,” she muttered, “still more reindeer. There must be hundreds! Must be—”

Suddenly she drew back among the dark boughs. Had she caught a glimpse of a skulking figure? She could not be sure. The dog crowded close to her, trembling. Why did he tremble? Could he sense danger?

Creeping back up the ridge, she once more turned her back upon her camp. She must make some fresh discoveries. But the storm was beginning in earnest now. All about her were swirls of blinding snow. Now she could see for a distance of forty yards, and now but a few feet.

“Wild spot this,” she said to the dog. “Reindeer will be stampeded by the storm. They may rush over the ridge and perish.”

Slowly a plan was forming in her mind. She would get behind the herd, then drive it forward to the narrow sheltered valley at the edge of which their camp was made.

“They’ll be safe there,” she told herself. But if there were outlaws, marauders behind this herd? She shuddered. Ah, well, she must risk it. She owed that to her friend and her grandfather’s friend, John Bowman.

For a quarter of an hour she battled her way against the storm. Then, seized with sudden fear lest she lose contact with the herd, she hurried down the slope.

She had just reached the bed of the frozen stream when, for a space of seconds, the air cleared. Through that half-light she saw two dark figures. They were moving up the slope. Were they a man and a sled, or two men? She could not be sure. A second more and all was blotted out in one wild whirl of snow.

Looking down, she saw what appeared to be an answer to her question—a sled track in the snow. Bending down, she examined it carefully. “Eskimo sled,” was her verdict. The tracks were too close together for a white man’s sled, and the runners too broad. They were wooden runners, made of driftwood.

Already she was out of touch with the herd. Whatever happened, she must

hasten on.

“Phantom, where are you?” she exclaimed in sudden consternation. Where indeed was the collie? He was gone, had vanished into the ever-increasing storm. A feeling of loneliness, almost of despair, swept over her. Why had she taken such chances? In a strange land one must exercise caution.

“Got to get going.” As she hurled herself forward before the storm, she was fairly lifted from her feet by the violence of the wind. Now spinning like a top and now sailing along like a kite over the snow, she missed a spruce tree by inches, went hurtling over some young firs, then tripped over tangled branches to at last land sprawling on all fours over a snow bank.

“Whew! What a—” she broke short off to listen. What was that? A dog barking?

“Yes! Yes!” She was on her feet. “It’s Phantom and I know the meaning of that bark. He hasn’t started a rabbit, nor is he afraid. He’s driving cattle, reindeer! And why not? He’s a collie.”

Once again, more cautiously, she took up the trail. Her course was clear enough now. All she had to do was to follow on, perhaps give the dog a word of encouragement now and then. She would herd the reindeer up the ravine. Soon they would be at camp. From that point the deer could spread out in the narrow protected valley.

“Yes, that’s it,” she said aloud. “There’s Phantom now.”

She caught fleeting glimpses of the dog. Now he was here, now there, and there. What a fast worker he was! The moment a deer lagged, he was at its heels.

And the reindeer? She saw them indistinctly, like a picture out of focus. But there must be hundreds of them. How had they been driven all this way? And why?

She cast apprehensive glances to right, left, then back. There had been something secretive about the way that man back there on the trail had acted. She saw no one now. The snow fog was closing in.

“Go, Phantom! Go after them!” she cried. “Good old Phantom!” How glad she was that they had responded to the Phantom’s appeal and had saved him.

Just then she caught the gleam of a light, and heard a shout. It was her grandfather's voice. She was nearing the camp. It was all right now. The deer were safe from the storm and from—from what else? She could not be sure. Only one thing she knew, they were John Bowman's reindeer and John Bowman was her friend.

An hour later, with the wind tearing and cracking about their tent, the four of them, grandfather, Jodie, Florence, and At-a-tak, sat on their sleeping bags in awed silence listening to the rush and roar of the storm. At their feet, dreaming day-dreams, lay the collie who on that day had covered himself with glory. That splendid herd was safe from the storm. Tomorrow when the storm had gone roaring on towards the north, they would begin unraveling the mystery that had to do with the presence of these reindeer in this wild, uninhabited region.

"Wandered away," said grandfather.

"Somebody stole," said At-a-tak.

"Perhaps the regular herders are taking them somewhere," said Jodie.

But who could surely know? They must wait and see.

CHAPTER XVII
THE BLACK SEAL'S TOOTH

Florence stopped short in her tracks. It was early next morning. She had wandered some distance from camp. Bending over, she picked something from the snow. That something was brightly colored orange and green. It had shone out of the solid white of snow at her feet.

"Tracks," she thought, "Eskimo tracks, and now this." The thing she held in her hand was strange. A small leather packet, it was decorated with masses of bright beads. As she examined it she saw that it had been sewn up tight, but she could feel some small hard objects within.

"Gold nuggets, perhaps," her imagination soared. Two bits of leather thong led out from the bag. That they had been one piece she knew at once. "Worn about the neck," she concluded, "and the thong broke."

Next instant she was calling, "At-a-tak!"

"Let's see." The Eskimo girl burst through a clump of evergreens. "Ah-ne-ca!" she exclaimed at sight of the little sack. "Came from Russia, this one. Not Eskimo, no! no! *Chuckches* from Russia. What you call it? Charm! Keep bad spirits away, think that, this *Chuckche* man."

"Well," said Florence, "it might keep bad spirits away, but it didn't keep bad ideas out of his mind. He and his friends tried to steal five hundred of John Bowman's reindeer, that's plain.

"Now—" her tone changed, "looks as if these natives had become frightened, leaving us with the reindeer on our hands. Two hundred miles from anywhere. What are we going to do about it?"

"Yes," said At-a-tak. What she meant was, 'Yes, here's a situation for you!' And

Florence agreed with her. Here they were on a golden quest, marching with dog teams and supplies into the uncharted North in search of a lost and hidden mine, and now of a sudden they found themselves encamped with a whole herd of reindeer belonging to a friend.

“Anyway, we won’t starve,” the girl laughed. “Plenty of reindeer steak.”

“Yes,” said At-a-tak.

“We won’t go back,” Florence decided suddenly.

“No,” agreed the Eskimo girl.

“We’ll go on north,” said Florence. “We’ll take the deer with us. We’ve just got to!”

“Yes,” said At-a-tak.

It was the day after the storm. All was white and quiet now. Florence and the Eskimo girl had gone in search of a clue that would give them a reason for the presence of this valuable herd of reindeer in such a place. Apparently they had found the answer. Here and there were snow-blown tracks of dogs, sleds and natives. These led away from the narrow valley. Without question, these natives, overcome by a desire to live easily off that which belonged to another, had driven these deer into the hills. At sight of white men they had fled. Would they return? Florence shuddered. “Have to be on the watch,” she told herself. To At-a-tak she said:

“Come! Let’s go back to camp.”

When their report had been made, Tom Kennedy agreed that they should take the deer with them. “We’ll camp here until tomorrow morning, give the deer a chance to feed, then we’ll press on up the fork to the mine.

“The mine,” his voice rose, “it’s still there. Bound to be! Joe and me, we hid it, hid it good and plenty.”

“Hid it?” Florence wanted to ask. “How can you hide a gold mine?” She did not ask. She would wait and see for herself. Long ago she had learned the uselessness of asking questions when a little patient waiting would permit one to

answer them for oneself.

A short time later, in the shadow of a fir tree, she cut the threads that closed that small beaded bag, then shook into her hand three bits of ivory. Two were white, the long, sharp teeth of a fox, and one was black as night, the tooth of a seal. This black one had been buried perhaps for hundreds of years beneath the sands of the sea.

“Good luck charm,” she murmured. “Wonder if it will bring good luck to us.”

Hours later, in a dreamy sort of way she was wondering this all over again. There was need at this moment for luck.

She was seated beside the coals of a campfire. The moon in all its glory hung above her. Stretching across the sky the Milky Way seemed a scarf of finest lace.

Her eyes, however, were not much upon the sky. They roved the snowy slopes. They took in every clump of fir and spruce. They rested with pleasure upon the brown spots that were, she knew, sleeping reindeer. She was guarding camp. They had decided that it was best to keep a watch. Jodie had all but insisted upon keeping her watch, but to this she would not listen.

“I’m as good a man as you are, even if I am a girl,” was her laughing challenge.

“*Chuckches*,” she was thinking, “how would natives of Siberia come so far?” And yet, the charm in her pocket had come from Russia—Siberia—the Arctic coast of Asia. At-a-tak had assured her of that. How strange!

Then she thought of the hidden mine. They would be there tomorrow. A feeling of pleased excitement, like the day before Christmas, ran through her being. Be there tomorrow. Would they? Perhaps there was no mine worthy of the name—only an old man’s dream. Well, even this had to be proved tomorrow. Tomorrow —

She started from this reverie, then listened sharply. Had there come an unaccustomed sound, like someone talking low in the distance?

A sound did reach her ears, a short, sharp barking. White foxes barking in the night. But this other sound—could it be some wild creature, perhaps a wolf, grumbling to his mate?

After that the night was still. She thought there had never before been such silence—the great white silence of the North. She imagined one might hear the rush of stars in their orbits.

Then again that silence was broken. The sound this time was very near, like the low mush-mush of footsteps on the snow, it seemed to come from the ridge above. Three clumps of spruce trees were there. Anyone passing from one to the other would be hidden. The nearest was not twenty yards from the camp. Her hands moved nervously as she sat watching those low spruce trees.

A moment passed, another, and yet another. The silence appeared to deepen. Blue-gray shadows of trees seemed to creep toward her. Absurd! She shook herself free of the illusion.

Then of a sudden she saw it—a face. One instant it was there among the spruce boughs. The next it was gone.

“A native?” A prickly sensation raced up her spine. It was night. She was alone, was awake. Should she waken the others?

“It’s my watch,” she told herself resolutely. “The face is gone. The reindeer are safe. So-o—” with a sigh she settled back in her place.

When she awoke next morning she was tempted to believe that her seeming to see that face among the trees was the result of an overworked imagination.

It was At-a-tak who soon changed her mind about this. The native girl had stood a short watch in the early morning. The face among the trees had reappeared. The man had spoken to her in his native tongue. The story she had to tell was strange.

This man she said was indeed a native of Russia. He and his people had visited America in a big skin boat. When they started on the homeward journey, ice drove them back. In America, they had no food. They must hunt. Finding this herd, and knowing little of American laws, they had driven it into the hills.

“But now,” At-a-tak concluded, “no more drive reindeer, those Russian natives. I say, ‘Go away quick. White man will catch you, put in jail, maybe shoot you.’ He say, ‘Go away quick.’ That one go away far. So,” she sighed, “not bother reindeer more.”

“And so,” Jodie laughed, “we have one fine reindeer herd on our hands. What shall we do with it?”

“Take them along; eat them one by one if we must,” was Tom Kennedy’s reply. “But now the cry is ‘On to the mine!’

“On to the gold mine!” he shouted.

“On to the mine! On! On to the mine!” came echoing back.

Not so fast. There was the herd of reindeer, they must be driven on before. In spite of the fact that this herd in an emergency would save them from starvation, Florence felt inclined to bewail the fact that this extra responsibility had been thrust upon them.

“Friends,” she said to her grandfather as they ate a hurriedly prepared breakfast of sourdough pancakes, “friends are fine, but sometimes they are a lot of trouble. If John Bowman hadn’t been our friend, we might have left those deer to shift for themselves.”

“N-no,” the old man spoke slowly, “no, girl, that’s where you’re wrong. It does give us an added responsibility, our friendship with John. But reindeer are property, valuable property. Many a man in this cold white world would have starved had it not been for the reindeer. So we’ll have to look after ’em the best we can.”

“Grandfather,” the girl thought with increased admiration, “surely is a fine old man! If everyone was like him, what a world this would be!”

“We’ll get there all the same!” exclaimed Tom. “You watch and see.”

“Come on, Phantom, old boy!” Florence shouted to the collie dog a few moments later. “We’ve got to get this Arctic caravan on the move.”

The dog let out a joyous yelp and they were on their way.

It was growing dusk on that short day of the Northland when, on crossing a low ridge, they sighted a large oval spot that seemed jet black against the surrounding white.

“A frozen lake,” said Jodie.

For one full moment they stood there in silence. The scene that lay before them was beautiful beyond compare. The sun setting behind white and purple mountains, the frozen oval of water that in summer must seem a mirror, the graceful reindeer wandering down over the sloping field of white—all this beauty would remain with Florence as long as she lived. Yet the words of her grandfather would linger longer. What he said was:

“Yes, girl, that’s the lake. In fact, it’s *the* lake! And yonder—” his voice broke with emotion, “yonder is the cabin Joe and I put up so long ago.”

Sure enough, as the girl looked closely, she did see a small cabin, half buried in snow, nestling among the trees.

“The cabin!” she exclaimed. “The cabin! And now, where’s the mine?”

“Time enough for that, girl.” With eager stride the old man started down the hill. “Time enough. The cabin comes first.” At that they all went racing away.

“It’s strange,” the old man murmured a half hour later, “fifteen years have gone. And yet here is our cabin, just as we left it. Even the flour in that big can is good. No one has been here since we left. Surely this is a strange, mysterious, empty land.”

“But the gold mine?” The words slipped unbidden from Florence’s lips.

At that her grandfather did a curious thing. With one long bony finger that trembled slightly, he pointed straight down at the center of the floor:

“We hid it. Hid it good.”

“But wh—where is it?” the girl stammered.

“The two middle planks we hewed out of a spruce log,” was the answer. “Lift ’em up and you’ll see.”

Florence and Jodie did lift the planks. They did see. Beneath the cabin floor was a dark cavity.

“Not very deep,” the old man laughed happily. “Not far down to the bed rock. Flash your light down there, son.”

Jodie threw the gleam of his electric torch to the bottom of the cavity. Then an exclamation escaped his lips. Casting back the gleam of his torch, some tiny objects appeared to turn the place into an inverted sky, all full of stars.

“Gold!” the old man murmured. “It’s gold, son. Gold!”

After Florence had crept into her sleeping bag that night, she found her mind filled with many questions. Would they truly find gold, much gold, down there in that dark hole? For her grandfather’s sake, she hoped so. What of the reindeer? They were feeding and sleeping now in that narrow valley. Would they be able to drive these all the way to Nome? Would those Russian natives truly remain away, or would hunger drive them back?

“There’ll be trouble if they come back,” she thought. “Trouble. Troub—” At that she fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII
TO BE OR NOT TO BE

In the meantime life did not lack for excitement back in the Matamuska valley. Strange tales had come to Mary both by mail and by air. Brought by air-mail, two letters from Florence had reached her. They told of the lost mine, of the dog race that was to be run and of the all too exciting life the big girl was living in the far North.

“Miss Santa Claus,” Mary whispered when she had read those letters twice. “Speed Samson said I should be little Miss Santa Claus.” She was thinking of those delayed Christmas presents to the Eskimo children still lying there in the postoffice in Anchorage. As she closed her eyes she tried to picture the miles and miles of timber, tundra, and endless snow she must fly over to reach that strange land.

“Speed Samson will take Mr. Il-ay-ok up there,” she whispered. “I could go too and take all those presents. I wonder—”

Yes, it did seem probable that when the hunting season was over, Speed would, taking a chance of being paid in fox skins, fly the little Eskimo to his home. Truth is, he was growing very fond of the little man. Having taken him along on a hunting trip he discovered that he was a capital cook and that he could prepare meat in a manner that delighted his guest-hunters. After that he took him often.

It was on one of these occasions that something happened which made Mary’s dreams of becoming “little Miss Santa Claus” lighter and brighter. Speed carried a short-wave radio in his plane. It was on this evening, after he had landed on the little lake at Rainbow Farm, planning to stay all night, that the thing happened. Mary, Mark, and Mr. Il-ay-ok were in the cabin of the plane taking turns at listening to the radio. Speed himself had the head-set clamped over his head when suddenly he exclaimed:

“It’s some cute kids way up at Cape Prince of Wales. School teacher’s children or something. Big brother’s rigged up a short-wave outfit. They think they’re talking only to some people on a small island seventy miles away, but it’s going out over the air. Something about a Christmas tree made of willow branches and a driftwood log. Seems there was to have been quite a Christmas up there, dolls, toys, candy, everything. The presents—”

“Yes! Yes! I know!” Mary broke in. “The presents didn’t come. Too late for the boat. They’re in Anchorage now.”

“Is that a fact?” Speed stared at her in surprise.

“Say-ee!” he exclaimed suddenly. “Guess they got on to my listening in on the air. They’re talking in some new lingo. Guess it’s Eskimo. Here, Mr. Il-ay-ok, give me your ears.” He clamped the head-set over the Eskimo’s head.

“Oh! Ah-ne-ca!” the little man smiled broadly. “Yes. Talking Eskimo.”

“What do they say?” Mary exclaimed.

“Can’t tell now. Bye-and-bye.” The Eskimo waved her away.

“Let him alone,” Mark scolded. “It may be important, a shipwreck, or—or something.”

It was important, very important to at least three young people quite far away. It was not a shipwreck. An Eskimo girl was talking. Eskimo people are born story tellers, and Kud-lucy was telling a story to No-wad-luk, her little friend at Shishmaref Island. The story was long, but in her excitement she forgot all else.

As Mr. Il-ay-ok listened to the tiny Eskimo’s story, Mary waited in breathless silence. What will this story mean to me, she was asking herself. Perhaps much. Perhaps nothing at all.

Of a sudden Mr. Il-ay-ok dragged the head-set from his ears. “Gone!” he smiled broadly. “All over now.”

“Tell us!” Mary’s eyes shone. “What did they say?”

“Long story. Must tell all,” Mr. Il-ay-ok spoke slowly.

He did tell all and a most interesting narrative it proved to be. The little Eskimo girl's story as he told it was this:

There was to have been a Christmas tree at the Cape. What was a Christmas tree? Oh, something quite wonderful! So bright it was that it shone like the sun. And on this bright tree there grew all manner of strange things. Little people? Yes, little people, no longer than a man's foot, but all dressed in bright clothes. Could they talk? To be sure. Yes, and cry and close their eyes, and go for a walk. Someone apparently had done her best to give Kud-lucy a real notion of what a Christmas tree was like. Had she succeeded? You be the judge.

Yes, and there were to have been more things, Kud-lucy hurried on. Small seals that were not truly seals, and walrus and polar bears. Yes, and many things no Eskimo had ever seen before.

"But now—" little Kud-lucy's voice had faltered, "now there is to be no Christmas tree, not any at all!" Why? Because the big boat had come too soon. All the wonderful things apparently were left behind.

At this instant apparently little Kud-lucy suddenly realized that she was talking in some strange, mysterious manner to her friend far away. The discovery frightened her and she had gone off the air.

As the story ended, Mary jumped to her feet exclaiming:

"Just think! To be Miss Santa Claus to a hundred Eskimo children! But then—" She sat down quite suddenly to stare out into the dark, cold night.

"Why not?" said Speed.

"It's a long, long way."

"No way is long any more, with an airplane," he replied quietly.

"Well, perhaps. Who knows?" Mary looked at Mark. He said never a word. There was no need. She could read his thoughts. He was thinking, "I love those Eskimo children, but I love Mary more. I want her always to be safe. And yet—I wonder."

That night beside the huge, barrel stove in the Hughes' cabin, Mr. Il-ay-ok talked

long of his people who lived on the rim of a frozen sea. He spoke of the children, of their play and their simple toys, of their cheerful natures and happy smiles. With every word Mary's interest grew. Her cheeks burned as she dreamed on of that suggested flight into the North.

"Christmas in Eskimo-land, dog-teams, reindeer and everything," she whispered to herself. "Then perhaps Florence will be ready to return and we shall fly home together." How she missed Florence! Then and there something like a resolve was formed in her mind. Would she go? There would be solemn family conferences, but in the end, would she go? To this question, for the moment, there came no answer.

Now Mr. Il-ay-ok was talking of other things, he was telling why that man Loome hated him. Somehow government officials had been persuaded that the Eskimo should drive their reindeer into the hills where feed was more plentiful. This they would never do; first they would sell their deer for very little. Loome and his companions were planning to profit by their misfortune.

"Now," the little man's eyes shone, "now, I have the papers. Here," he patted his pocket. "Reindeer may stay as they are. The so wonderful government has said that. My people, they will be happy. But first I must show them the paper. First day of next year it will be too late. So-o, I must go. I must fly."

"And you shall fly," said Speed Samson. "Here. Shake on it." They shook hands in silence. Mary's heart burned with hope.

"Miss Santa Claus in Eskimo land," she whispered.

Next day Madam Chicaski, who had of late been acting rather strangely, did the oddest thing of all. When in the summer Bill had returned from his fruitless search for gold, he had left his pick and shovel in the Hughes woodshed. They were still there. On this morning Mary saw the large Russian woman take the pick from the shed and march resolutely toward the giant stump that stood in the back yard. It was an innocent appearing thing, that stump. All weather-beaten and festooned with rustling morning-glory vines, it seemed a thing destined to stand there for years. And yet, as Mary watched, she felt sure that this woman meant to attack its roots, if possible to tear it from the earth.

"I wonder why?" she asked herself. At that moment her mind was filled with mingled emotion, surprise, consternation and something of alarm. This last she

could not even have explained to herself.

There was, it seemed, no immediate cause for anxiety. The big woman did not swing the pick, at least, not that day. Instead as she came near to the stump, using the pick for a cane, she stood there leaning on it looking for all the world like a picture called “The Man with the Hoe.” On her face at that moment was a look Mary had seen there before, it was the gaze of one who worships at a shrine.

In the far away valley, work on the lost mine progressed famously. Since the greater part of the digging had been done long ago by Tom Kennedy and his partner, there remained little to be done save to pick away at the gold-laden gravel, to hoist it through the floor, then to wash it out in water brought up from the lake. Even with so much of the work done, it was a slow process. Days passed. Each day saw Tom Kennedy’s moose-hide sack a little heavier, but each day brought their small supply of flour, sugar, bacon and beans dwindling lower and lower.

“We’ll kill a fat reindeer and pay Bowman for it when we get back,” said Tom Kennedy.

“Grandfather, if we are to drive those reindeer all the way back it will take days and days,” Florence was worried. “There will be nothing left to eat but reindeer meat. Can we live on that?”

“We can try. Eskimo do.”

“We’re not Eskimo.”

“No-o. But something will turn up. We’ll manage.” The old man was too absorbed in his golden quest to think overmuch of things to eat.

Then came the great day. “The mother-lode.” Tom Kennedy spoke to Florence. She was at his side in the mine. “See!” The light of his torch was cast back by a yellow gleam. “See! Nuggets big as bird’s eggs.”

“And—and will this be the end?” she asked.

“The end, yes,” his tone was impressive. “But enough. Who could ask for more?

Only look there’ll be—” He broke short off to listen intently.

“An airplane!” the girl’s voice was low and tense.

“They’ve found us,” the old man muttered.

“Who?”

“Who knows?” was his strange answer. “No good ever comes from spying.”

CHAPTER XIX
COASTING UP HILL

At very nearly that same hour a blue and gray airplane rose from the frozen sea near Anchorage. Its passengers were only two, a dark-eyed, animated girl, and a stolid little Eskimo man. At the controls was Speed Samson. You will not need a second guess as to who the passengers were, nor the nature of the cargo they carried. Little Miss Santa Claus, who in real life was Mary Hughes, had her pack securely stowed away in the baggage compartment of the plane. She was on her way.

Two hours later she found herself drawing her mackinaw closely about her. It was cold in the small cabin of their airplane, stinging cold. How high were they in air? She did not know. How far north were they? She did not know. She was not thinking of that so much, but of the whole strange adventure.

It had taken courage to say “yes” at last. The postmaster in Anchorage had listened to their story with interest, but he hesitated to give his consent to their airplane delivery of the packages of Christmas presents to Cape Prince of Wales. “It is quite irregular,” he had said, “and you might never get there. It’s a great white world you are going into. There are few landing fields.”

“That is true,” Speed had agreed. “However, I’ve never yet taken off for any destination and failed to arrive.”

“And besides,” Mary had put in, “if we don’t take their presents, they won’t arrive until Fourth of July, when the boats come. And what’s the good of Christmas presents on the Fourth of July?”

“What indeed?” the gray-haired postmaster had smiled. Finally he surrendered and gave his consent.

“And now—” Mary’s brow wrinkled as her eyes took in the gathering gray around them. “Now it is going to snow and we—” She did not finish.

Yes, they must land. But how? Where? Suddenly, seeming close enough to be touched, a mountain loomed before them.

With a wild whirl that took her breath, the airplane swung about to go speeding along the side of that jagged ridge.

“It—it’s beautiful—and terrible!” she whispered as she sat up to stare out of the window.

Ah, yes, it was all of that. Here was a wall towering and smooth like the side of a sky-scraper, and there a black shaft of rock rising like a church spire, and here a shining river that, as their eyes became accustomed to it, turned into a broad glacier.

“The snow is falling faster. Where can we land? And if we can’t land?” Terror gripped the girl’s heart.

Of a sudden the plane once again swooped downward. She caught her breath. What had happened? Was their supply of gas running low? Were they to make a forced landing? Or had Speed’s keen eye discovered some hidden valley offering a safe landing? She was soon enough to know.

Directly beneath them there appeared a broad stretch of white.

“A valley!” The girl heaved a sigh of relief.

The plane circled. She was glad they were to land now, for in the last two hours they had made good progress. She was hungry. Soon they would be brewing hot cocoa on the little gas stove, heating canned meat and searching out big round crackers. They—

Once again her thoughts broke off. The plane had bumped. There was something strange about that bump, too solid or something. Bump-bump-bump, each bump was stranger than the last.

But now she sighed with relief, for the plane was coming to a standstill. Slow—slow, slower, stop.

She was preparing to open the door, when with a little cry of dismay she fell back among the blankets. A terrible thing was happening, the plane was gliding backward!

“What—what is it?” cried Mr. Il-ay-ok.

“We—we’re on a sloping ledge. We’re gliding down—down! We—” Mary’s voice ended in a gasp. Her heart stood still, then went racing on. The plane was gliding faster, faster, ever faster, and back of them, not thirty seconds’ glide, was a deep, dark abyss! They had landed half way up the sloping mountainside.

“Dear God—”

Her prayer was answered before it was said. The motor thundered. Their backward gliding slowed. Slow, slower, stop. Then the reverse, the motor picked up speed, and they glided forward faster, faster, faster. Then, with a startling lurch the plane swung to the right. Next instant they were once more floating on God’s good free air.

Then, perhaps because they had seen perils enough, the sun quite suddenly broke from behind the clouds, the snowfall ceased, and they found themselves sailing high over a long, winding valley.

Two hours later, having sailed on through a clear sky for many miles, and feeling the need for rest and food, they circled low over the frozen surface of a broad stream.

“Good!” said the Eskimo. “Now we eat.”

“See!” Mary exclaimed, pointing off to the left, “there are three columns of smoke rising up from the edge of the forest. People living around here. Wonder what they are? White men, Eskimo, or Indians?”

“No Eskimo,” said Mr. Il-ay-ok, “Too far, this place.”

So they came down. Three times, like some lone wild duck searching a water hole, the plane circled low. The third time it dropped a little lower. Bump-bump-bump, glide-glide-glide on their broad skis, and—a perfect landing? Almost. But what was this? The ship tilted sharply to one side. Mary, whose hand was on the door, was thrown out to fall flat on the snow-encrusted ice. For ten long seconds

it seemed the airplane would roll on over and crush her. But no, still tilted to a rakish angle, it came at last to rest.

What had happened? They were not long in finding the answer. Early in the winter the river had frozen over, perhaps two feet thick. This ice had cracked. Water had flowed through and flooded the ice. Once again it froze over, but not thick enough. One ski of the plane had broken through to settle down on the solid ice a foot below.

“Here we are, and here we stay.” Speed’s tone had a sad finality about it.

“But, Speed, can’t we pry it out?” Mary asked hopefully.

“Impossible,” the pilot shook his head. “Ten or twenty men might do it, but not you and I.”

“Then it shall be ten or twenty men!” Mary exclaimed. “Christmas bells must ring.”

“Wha—what do you mean?” the pilot stared at her.

“We saw smoke, didn’t we?” she turned to the Eskimo.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Three columns smoke.”

“Whites or Indians?”

“Who knows?” said Mary. “And who cares? We must find them. They must help us.” She was ready for the trail.

And indeed there was need for haste, the airplane was freezing in. So, forgetting their hunger and their need for rest, they hurried away in the direction of the three columns of smoke.

Soon they came upon a trail leading into the forest. In silence they followed that trail. How still it was there in the forest! As a snow-bunting flew from twig to twig, Mary caught the flutter of his tiny wings. A snowshoe rabbit, leaping from the trail, brought an unuttered cry to her lips. Then of a sudden a deep voice shattered that silence. It said:

“How!”

Seeming to appear from nowhere, a six-foot Indian stood before them. He was not dressed in skins and feathers, but his dark face, straight black hair, and large hawk-like nose told the story.

“How!” said Speed.

“Airplane come?” the Indian said.

“Yes, and we are in trouble. You must help us.”

“Where you go?”

“Eskimo-land.”

“Eskimo bad.” The Indian’s voice dropped, his dark face formed itself into a scowl. “Very bad, Eskimo. Long time ’go kill Indians—much Indians.”

“Yes, a long time ago,” Speed agreed quietly. “Then came good white men. They told the Eskimo no kill. Now all the Eskimos are good. Tomorrow night is Christmas Eve. We are bringing them presents, these good Eskimos. We are in trouble. You must help us.”

“Oh! Christmas?” The Indian’s face lighted.

“We have twenty pounds of candy for your children,” Mary encouraged.

“Oh, candy?” The Indian’s face grew radiant. “Indian like candy, like much. I bring help, bring everyone. Come quick!” He trotted away.

Scarcely had they returned to the plane than the edge of the forest swarmed with Indians, little Indians, big Indians, men, women, and children, and all eager to help.

It was no time at all until that airplane ski was back on the top surface of the ice. Then, after presenting the gifts of candy and receiving a friendly farewell, the little party began taxiing down the river two miles to a spot where there was a supply of gasoline, and where they might pile into their cabin for a few winks of sleep.

Supper over, they tucked their blankets about them.

“In four hours,” said Speed, “if the moon is out, we shall sail away. Tomorrow evening will be Christmas Eve, and we still have seven hundred miles to go.”

“Seven—seven hundred!” Mary exclaimed. “Can we make it?”

“If the sun and moon smile on us,” Speed replied cheerfully.

Little wonder that Mary whispered a prayer for clear skies before she fell asleep.

Meanwhile three cute children, Margaret, Nellie, and Tom, the only white children at far-off Cape Prince of Wales, were doing their best to make up for the loss of their presents. The Christmas tree of willow branches and a driftwood log had been set up. Behind closely drawn blinds, they had done their best to decorate it. Rustling willow leaves had been brightened by many feet of colored popcorn strings. Here and there a red, green or orange box hung. Safely shielded from dry leaves, twenty candles shone. Common white candles they were, but who cared for that?

“It’s grand!” exclaimed Margaret.

“Not half bad,” Tom agreed.

“But just think what it might have been!” Nellie struggled to hold back a tear.

Outside in the frosty night, little Kud-lucy and No-wad-luk, two little Eskimo children, were peeking through a crack not quite covered by a shade.

“Oh, good!” Kud-lucy danced up and down. “It’s the Christmas tree after all! And it’s almost as bright as the sun!”

“But where are the little people who walk, talk, and go to sleep?” asked No-wad-

luk.

“Oh, they—” said Kud-lucy with a superior air, “they are walking. They are coming a long, long way. They will be here tomorrow night. You’ll see.”

Would they? Would the moon look down and smile?

CHAPTER XX
BLACK WATERS AND GRAY DOGS

When the airplane came roaring in from nowhere to circle for a landing close to the lost mine, Jodie and At-a-tak were away bringing in the reindeer herd lest it stray too far. Before Florence and her grandfather could make their way up from the mine, the plane had landed on the ice of the lake and had taxied to a spot quite hidden from view.

“Who can they be?” Florence asked in sudden alarm.

“Some smart fellows who’ve heard about our lost mine. Come to help us dig gold, jump our claim, perhaps,” was her grandfather’s reply. “Little good it’ll do ’em. Three hours more and we’ll have the place about cleaned out. They’ll be welcome to the rest.

“Of course,” he added, “there may be other pockets. They’re welcome to them, too. One strike’s enough for us.

“Just think, girl,” his voice grew mellow, “thirty-five years in the North and now, success at last. Ah, girl, it’s good.”

“Yes, grandfather, it is,” Florence was scarcely listening. She was thinking, “Suppose those men are looking for that reindeer herd? What if they think we stole the deer?” She was having a bad moment.

Just then four men appeared at the foot of the ridge. “One white man, three natives,” was Tom Kennedy’s instant announcement.

“That white man,” Florence was startled. “There’s something familiar about him, the way he walks. Grandfather!” her voice rose. “He’s my pilot, Dave Breen, the man who brought me to Nome!” She dashed madly down the hill.

“Well! Well! Think of finding you here!” Dave Breen exclaimed at sight of her. “And you a reindeer rustler! Know what they do to ’em? Shoot ’em at sunrise,” he laughed a roaring laugh. “But tell me, how come you’ve got the herd of deer we’ve been looking for?”

“There’s mulligan, reindeer mulligan on the stove,” said Florence. “And coffee’s steaming. Come on up and I’ll feed you and tell you our story, or at least part of it.”

“You’d better come clean,” laughed Dave. “I’m sworn in as a deputy and I’ve been instructed to arrest any persons in possession of that herd.”

Over coffee and mulligan, with her grandfather’s permission, Florence told the whole story.

“So your work here’ll be done in a few hours?” said Dave Breen. “Know what day tomorrow is?”

“No, I—”

“So you forgot. Well, I’ll be jiggered!” Dave exclaimed. “It’s the day before Christmas. And do you know what?” he paused for proper emphasis. “Know what? We’re going to leave these Eskimos in charge of the reindeer; they can bring them in O. K. We’ll leave them At-a-tak to mend their boots and her gray team to haul their supplies. They’ll be more than all right.

“And as for you and Jodie and that grandfather of yours, I’m going to pack you up in my plane and fly you back to Nome for the grandest Christmas you have ever known. And you can’t say no!”

“Who would want to say no?” Florence was fairly overcome with joy. But there’s many a slip between a happy girl and a glorious Christmas of a particular sort, as you shall see.

Some hours later, in another corner of this Arctic world, the day before Christmas dawned bright and clear. A blue and gray plane rose gracefully up from a frozen river to go sailing away toward the north. And little Miss Santa Claus was still on board. Mr. Il-ay-ok was still her traveling companion and Speed Samson was at the controls.

Three hours they flew due north. Then they came down upon a white floor of shore-ice to rest and drink cups of steaming tea.

As Mary stepped from the plane she felt her nose pucker. It seemed too that someone with sharp tweezers had pinched her cheek.

“Cold! Boo!” she exclaimed.

“This is the North,” Speed laughed. “Just over yonder is the Arctic Circle. Should be able to see it in an hour or two.” He laughed again, and Mary laughed with him. But that they were at last quite far north they knew all too well.

Two hours later found them flying high over a vast black expanse, Bering Sea. As the girl looked down she shuddered. It seemed that this sea must be bottomless, for not a touch of light broke its deep, purple blackness.

Across this expanse, like fairy fleets, ice floes drifted. Once she was sure she saw a group of moving objects.

“Walrus!” Mr. Il-ay-ok shouted. “How you like landing among them?”

“We would not land among them,” was her answer. “Our plane can land on ice—not on water. We won’t land unless—” her heart skipped a beat.

A half hour later her heart stopped altogether for a second, then went racing. Their single motor was missing and they were still over the dark sea.

“There—there it is again!” she breathed.

She studied the look on Speed’s face, then shuddered anew.

A glance before her showed a white line. Was it a shore line? And could they make it? She dared not think further.

She settled back a moment later with relief. “Motor’s working better.” But this relief was not for long.

Ten minutes passed. The white line grew wider. At one end was a high spot, perhaps a mountain. Then again that chilling sput-sput-sput of a missing motor.

“We’ll make it!” she shouted bravely.

And in the end they did. Just as the motor stopped dead, due to a clogged fuel pipe, they found themselves over a blanket of white.

Circle low now. No chance for climbing. Take the landing that offers.

They took it with many a shuddering bump. Mary was thrown down upon a pile of Christmas toys. A talking doll cried, “Ma-ma!” and a croaking frog went “Herouk!” Then all was still.

“Well,” she said, gathering herself up, “we’re here!”

They were. But where were they?

“We’re lucky to be here at all,” was Speed’s comment. “And we’re here for some time! Require three days to smooth down these snow ridges for a take-off.”

“Three—three days!” Mary cried in dismay. “Why, then we—”

At that moment there arose a prodigious noise. Dogs, dozens of them, were making the air hideous with their barking. A moment more, and their plane was surrounded by great gray roaring beasts—Siberian wolfhounds, the fiercest, strangest, bravest dogs in all dog-land.

“Could anything be more terrible!” Mary wailed. “We must be nearly there, and now—”

“We can’t leave our plane, just now, that’s certain,” said Speed. “But wait! Luck may still be with us. Those dogs belong to someone. They came from somewhere.”

“Came from the hole in that snow-bank,” said Il-ay-ok. “House there!”

That “hole in a snow-bank” was indeed the entrance to a small low cabin quite buried in snow. Then from that hole came a huge man.

“A perfect giant of a man!” Mary was all aquiver with excitement. “It’s like a fairy story.”

The giant let out a great roar. The pack of wolfhounds stopped their barking, dropped their tails and one by one disappeared into the hole in the snow-bank. Then the giant approached the plane.

“Hello! Who are you?” said Speed, popping his head out of the cabin door.

“I’m Bill Sparks, a gold miner,” said the stranger.

“Oh! Oh! Yes, of course!” exclaimed Mr. Il-ay-ok. “Excuse, please. I do not know at first where we are. Now I know. Yes. Yes. Very good man, Mr. Bill Sparks.”

“What’s your business, stranger?” Bill Sparks looked at Speed.

“Well, you see,” Speed explained. “This little man—” he nodded at Mr. Il-ay-ok, “claimed he needed to get back to Cape Prince of Wales to save the Eskimos’ reindeer. So—”

“Sure, I’ve heard about that,” Bill Sparks broke in. “Hope he wins.”

“Yes! Yes! We win!” Mr. Il-ay-ok waved a paper excitedly. “Here is the paper. All my people shall know. They shall be told, keep reindeer O. K. Grand Christmas, mine.”

“There’s one more thing,” Speed managed to break in. “Lot of Christmas presents and little Miss Santa Claus here. I brought them along.”

“Why?” Bill Sparks stared. “I been hearin’ about them presents. Every Eskimo that drives by has been askin’ me if I thought they’d come.”

“They—they what?” Mary hopped out of the plane in her excitement.

“It’s a fact,” Bill Sparks insisted. “You see, Miss, this here’s Cape York. Cape Prince of Wales is only fifteen miles away. With them big dogs of mine, ’tain’t no drive at all!”

“Then you—” Mary began hopping up and down. “You—”

“Of course I’ll take you all over, Miss, and all them presents. Be glad to, Miss. Nothin’ I won’t do for the Eskimos. One of ’em brought me in when I’d went

snow-blind once. I'd have died if it hadn't a' been for him! Wait—"

Putting two fingers to his lips, he blew a shrill blast and, to Mary's terror, out from the dark hole piled the great gray pack of hounds.

"No need fer fear," Bill Sparks laughed, as she started to climb back into the plane, "my friends are their friends."

And so it happened that, just after the short day had faded and the Eskimos had gone to their little log and sod homes,—with sleighbells muffled—the happy flyers with Bill Sparks in the lead, his sled piled high with Christmas joy, stole round Cape Prince of Wales and right up to the schoolhouse door.

They managed to get there without being seen by a single Eskimo child.

It was Margaret, child of the schoolmaster, who opened the door in response to their knock.

"Merry Christmas!" Mary cried as the light came flooding out. "We're here, and so's Christmas!"

At the first sound of her voice, Nellie and Tom came racing from the big room where they were still stringing colored popcorn. Then such low exclamations of joy! Such a rush as there was as they bundled all the packages inside, then paused to hug their benefactors, Mary, Speed, and even the startled Bill Sparks.

"How did you get here?" Nellie cried at last. "All those presents! How could they?"

"Santa never fails," laughed Speed at last. "At least hardly ever, and surely he could not fail in Eskimo-land."

It was no time at all until Mary and the three children were busy trimming a more gorgeous tree than the children of Eskimo-land had ever known.

CHAPTER XXI
THE SECRET OF THE GREAT STUMP

It was two hours before the beginning of Christmas festivities, when the tree trimming came to an end.

“Let’s take a walk,” Speed suggested to Mary. “This is enchanted land. Think of it, Christmas Eve in Eskimo-land.”

“Yes, let’s walk,” Mary agreed.

“Boo! Such a coldness!” she exclaimed as they stepped outside.

“Snow fog’s drifted in too,” Speed surveyed the landscape. “Two hundred foot ceiling and growing less. Good thing we’re in.”

They had walked over the half mile of ice-covered beach to the foot of the mountain and had turned back when Speed, stopping dead in his tracks, exclaimed:

“Listen!”

Mary, listening with all her ears, at last caught a faint drumming sound.

“An airplane!” she looked at Speed.

“Sure is! In such a place and such a time! Mountain there. Sea over there! All I can say is, I wish them a happy landing.”

For a full quarter hour, all unmindful of the cold, of the dinner that awaited, and of the glowing Christmas tree, they stood there listening to the drone of the motor that now rose in volume and now faded away.

“They’re lost,” was Speed’s decision. “Looking for a landing.” Once, when the echo of the motor’s roar was thrown back as from the mountain, he gripped the girl’s arm hard. What was he waiting for? A crash? It did not come. Instead, the motor sounded out a mad burst of speed, then began again that slow droning.

“Well,” Speed shuddered, “they know where the mountain is now.”

“Listen!” a moment later he gripped her arm once more. “They—they’re going to try for a landing. Who knows where? We’d better—”

If he had any notion of flight, it was futile, for at that instant, far down the line, not twenty yards from the schoolhouse, a gray mass emerged from the snow-fog.

“Good boy! He’ll make it!” Speed exclaimed.

Calmly they awaited the coming of the plane as it bumped, bumped again, then taxied slowly forward.

“Mary! Look at that plane!” Speed became greatly excited. “Did you ever see it before?”

Mary made no answer. Perhaps she was too excited to hear. One thing was sure, her heart gave a great leap when, as the plane came to a standstill, a large girl dressed in a fur parka jumped from the plane.

“Florence!” she cried. “What are you doing here?”

“Mary!” Florence stood staring at her as if she were a ghost.

“To tell the truth,” Dave Breen, the pilot, who now climbed from his place, said, “we don’t quite know why we’re here. We don’t know where we are, but we’re mighty glad we have arrived.” At this they all laughed.

The story of Florence and her party was soon told. After completing their work at the mine, they had packed their belongings, including three moose-hide sacks of gold, in the plane and had sailed away.

“We got caught in a snow-fog,” Dave Breen concluded. “We flew for hours looking for a landing. At last, in desperation, we took a chance and here we are. But tell me, where are we?”

“Cape Prince of Wales, the very heart of Eskimo-land,” was Mary’s happy reply. “And this is Christmas Eve. What could be finer?”

At that moment Florence caught the sound of many Eskimo voices. Then the chorus ceased and she heard the familiar voice of Mr. Il-ay-ok. He continued alone. He was speaking slowly, earnestly. Florence saw a sober look come over each face. In the end, when Mr. Il-ay-ok had finished, they exclaimed in a low chorus: “Ke-ke! (go ahead) All right. All right. We bring ’em.”

“What was he saying?” Florence asked the teacher, who arrived at that moment.

“Il-ay-ok is telling of his airplane ride and how much it was going to cost,” he explained. “They are really quite business-like, these Eskimos. Il-ay-ok told them, since their reindeer had been saved, they must contribute one silver fox, three cross foxes or four white foxes each.”

“And will they?” Florence was interested.

“Sure. Didn’t you hear them say, ‘All right’?”

“But truly there is no need.” Florence was struck with a sudden thought. “There is money in the bank at Nome, enough I am sure. It’s the part earned by Il-ay-ok’s team when I won the dog race. Tell them about it, will you?”

There was little need of telling them in Eskimo, not a man of them but understood about money, even when told in English. But, like every other people, Eskimo love to be told in their own language. So the teacher told them.

If Florence needed any reward for her honesty and fair dealing, it came to her from the change of looks and the sudden exclamations of the natives as they heard the rare news.

“Mat-na! Ah-ne-ca!” they exulted. Then, “Na-goo-va-ruk Along-meet!” (Good for the white one) rose like a grandstand cheer.

“It’s all right,” Florence laughed. “I had my share and a lot of fun besides. And Merry Christmas to you all.”

“Il-a-can-a-muck! Il-a-can-a-muck!” (Thank you! Thank you!) they shouted in a chorus.

It goes without saying that the entire party attended the Christmas tree festival and all enjoyed it to the full. Surely nothing could have been more delightful than the privilege of watching the eyes of a hundred Eskimo children as they saw the tree for the first time.

“See!” Mary heard little No-wad-luk exclaim to her small friend. “See! There are all the little people who can walk and talk and go to sleep.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” was Kud-lucy’s proud reply. “They *did* come. They *did* walk all the way miles and miles. And they *did* get here just in time.”

Florence and Mary were scarcely expecting presents. They got them all the same. They were long, slim socks made of fur taken from the legs of a spotted reindeer fawn and they were filled with gold nuggets. On Florence’s was a tag saying “From a long-lost grandfather,” and on Mary’s “To little Miss Santa Claus.” Never, I am sure, had there been a merrier Christmas Eve than this.

Christmas morning broke bright and clear. After bidding their new-found friends good-bye and listening to the Eskimos’ “A-lin-a-muck” (Good-bye) and “Il-a-can-a-muck” (We thank you) the happy party sailed away for Nome, where they enjoyed a late evening feast of roast venison, wild cranberry sauce, plum pudding and all the trimmings.

Three days later Mary and Florence were back in the rustic cabin on Rainbow Farm. Florence had urged her grandfather to accompany her to the valley. He had refused, one airplane ride had been quite enough, and then, when one has lived in the far north thirty-five years—ah, well, perhaps next spring he would come down on the boat and they would buy a claim in her happy valley, who could tell? So she had left him, happy in the realization that his dream of a lifetime had at last come true.

And now since they had used up their tickets to adventure, a long winter in a peaceful valley lay before them.

But there was still Madam Chicaski to wonder about.

On a wintry morning, three days after her last happy landing, chancing to look out of the kitchen window, Florence, to her unbounded surprise, saw the powerful Madam Chicaski wielding Bill’s pick in a most surprising manner. What was more surprising still, she was executing a vigorous attack upon the

great stump over which bright flowers had cascaded all summer long.

“Stop! Stop! Don’t do that!” These words were on her lips. She did not say them. Something appeared to hold her back.

A moment more and she was glad they had not been spoken, for after one powerful swing of the pick, a dark spot had appeared beneath the stump.

“A cavity!” she whispered breathlessly. “A hollow place beneath the stump.”

Then, like a flash it came to her. This tree had not grown there. The stump had been hauled there, probably on a stone-boat, for the purpose of concealing something. But what did it conceal?

Fascinated, the girl continued to stare as the woman picked untiringly at the base of the great stump. When at last the Russian woman seized a stout pole, and using it as a pry, tipped the stump on its side to uncover a broad, deep cavity, the girl’s curiosity got the better of her and she ran into the yard to exclaim:

“Madam! Madam! What *are* you doing?”

“See!” On the woman’s face was a glorious smile. “See! All my beautiful things! All safe after these long years.”

Florence did see and her astonishment grew. The great copper kettle was there and the seven golden—well, perhaps they were only gold plated—candlesticks, and many other things as well. A curious old copper teakettle, a set of beautiful blue dishes which, by instinct, the girl knew were very old and valuable, and many other things were there.

Slowly, carefully, they removed each piece. Then, quite overcome with emotion, the aged woman sat down upon the ground.

“This,” she said after a long silence, pointing a thumb at the hole in the ground, “was our cellar. The ground is always frozen there. It keeps everything cool, everything. Ivan, my husband, hauled down the stump to make a place for my flowers. When we left we said, ‘We will hide everything in the cellar,’ it was a secret cellar, no one knew. ‘Then we will put on the stump. No one will guess.’”

“And no one ever did.” Florence laughed gaily, happy for the other’s sake.

The final chapter to this little mystery was, if anything, stranger, more happy than all the rest. Both Mary and her mother had always loved fine and truly rare china. Massive copper pots and pans had always fascinated them as well.

That night, as supper time approached, Madam Chicaski insisted that candles should be put in the golden candlesticks and that they should be set, all flickering and alight, three upon the mantel and four upon the table.

“Just as Ivan and I used to do,” she added with a happy sigh.

Supper was to be cooked in her copper pots and pans and served upon the beautiful blue dishes that made Florence tremble every time she touched one of them, lest she drop it.

It was a memorable meal. A little Indian girl had, that very afternoon, brought in a great salmon and had received for it a sack of potatoes. The baked salmon rested on a blue platter. It was surrounded by golden-brown potatoes, sweet butter and tall heaps of biscuits fresh from the oven.

When this repast was over, the Russian woman sat for a long time staring at the flickering candles and the marvelous blue dishes.

“No,” she murmured at last, “they shall not go. They have been here long. They shall remain forever, all these beautiful things. You all are good. You have been kind to an old woman whom you did not know. I am not a fairy godmother,” she laughed. “I am not God. I am only an old woman, Madam Chicaski. And this was my home. Yes, you shall have all these. They belong here. Even dishes and copper pots may be happy. They will be happy with you.”

Mary heard her every word. Yet she could not believe in their great good fortune. All these beautiful dishes, those rare pieces of copper, the seven golden candlesticks to remain in their humble cabin? Impossible.

Then came another wave of emotion that brought her to her feet.

“But, Madam!” she protested. “You will need them!”

“I need them?” Madam laughed again. “Did I not tell you? But no. I have not told. We are rich, Ivan and I. Ivan’s uncle died. He left all to Ivan. That is why we went away so fast. That is why we never came back.

“Tomorrow,” her tone changed, “I shall go back to Ivan. He is not strong, Ivan. He could not come. But I—” she sighed. “It was necessary that I come to see once more. Now I have come. I have seen. And I am, oh, so very happy!” She heaved a great sigh of joy, then moving to her place beside the fire, took up, perhaps for the last time, her peaceful dreams of those days that had passed, never to return. Next day, after bidding them farewell, she was to go trudging away toward the railway station.

“Well,” Florence whispered to herself as she crept beneath the covers in her loft-bed that night, “life can be strange and beautiful. It can be peaceful as well. Here in this happy valley one might find peace. But do I want peace? Mystery, adventure, the, long, long trail.” At that she fell asleep.

Did she accept peace or did she again take up the long, long trail? You will find the answer to that in the book called *Third Warning*.

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